

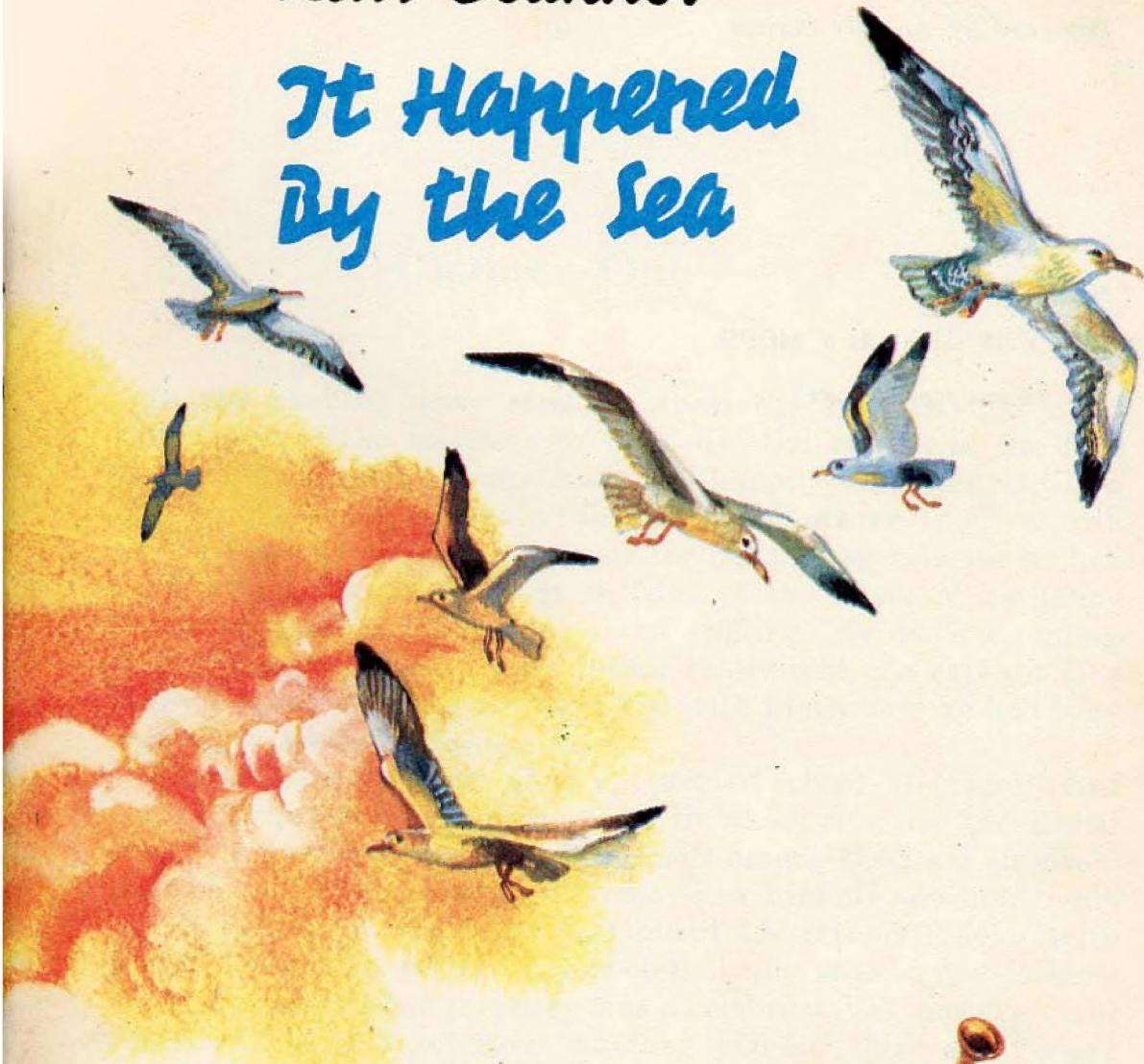


Kim
Selikov

*It
Happened
By the
Sea*

Kim Selikhov

It Happened
By the Sea



An Adventure Story



Raduga Publishers
Moscow

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ЭТО СЛУЧИЛОСЬ У МОРЯ

На английском языке

© Издательство «Детская литература», 1978 г.
English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

C 4803010102-576 042-86
031(05)-86

ISBN 5-05-000676-7

Chapter One

In the evening some students from the international camp came over to the Pioneers to work out the results of the first round of the angling competition. Val happily thought about how they would be fishing again the next day. However, that was still a long way off: just now he was feeling uneasy because he had been foolish enough to boast in front of the whole of his team: "We'll come first. I know all about angling. My dad's a famous fisherman, you know." Val's father really was the captain of a fishing vessel. Val had been to Cuba with him where he had been invited to set up a fishing fleet.

It was there, on Cuba, that Val started school. His family had lived on the island for three years in which time he had learnt fluent Spanish and made many friends among the local children. And he would never forget how they saw him off and how many wonderful things they had said about his father! Fidel Castro himself had come to the airport and firmly shaken his father's hand. Yes, his father certainly was a celebrity. Val, however, had turned out to be a notorious windbag: you see, Juan and he had not even caught a single small fish, let alone a big one.

Val sat and stared down at the ground and his cheeks burned so hotly that he felt he could light a fire with them.

However, the camp-fire was lit with a torch and not with Val's cheeks. And the honour fell to the best angler, Igor Igolochkin, from the first detachment, who, unlike Val, had caught three and a half kilogrammes of fish!

The cymbals boomed, the trumpets blared gaily, and the strings of the double-bass droned solemnly as the students' orchestra saluted the winners with a festive march. No, Val couldn't take it any longer! He leant towards Juan and whispered

something in his ear. And the latter looked attentively at him. By the light of the camp-fire Val looked as if he had suddenly got toothache. Juan nodded and they both slipped through to the back rows and then dashed into the bushes.

"I don't think anyone's spotted us," said Val.

And then all of a sudden they heard Natasha calling, "Boys, boys! Where are you off to?"

"Quick, Juan! Down to the sea!"

And the boys raced down the path as fast as their legs would carry them.

"Boys! Wait for me!"

"Turn left!" ordered Val, checking himself so as not to start cursing the tiresome girl.

On the beach Val and Juan sat down on an upturned fishing boat and got their breath back.

"That girl's as prickly as a burr!" said Val, breathing heavily.

"What's a burr?" asked Juan.

"A nasty prickly plant."

"Oh no, she's not! She's very kind. I saw her crying in the bushes today. She felt sorry for us because we lost."

"Sh! Can you hear footsteps? It's her! Quick! Under the boat!"

Straining himself, Val lifted the edge of the boat and Juan dived under.

"Now lift it up! Higher! Right!"

Val ducked under and they both held their breath.

Someone stepped cautiously over the pebbles, stopped for a moment by the boat and then walked on, the pebbles crunching underfoot... And then all grew silent again.

"She still caught us up," Val whispered. "Pokes her nose into everything. She wants to find out the secret."

"Which one?" asked Juan in a whisper.

"This one... Only don't say a word to anyone..." And just in case Natasha crept up on them again, Val switched to Spanish.

* * *

The boys went out fishing at dawn. The sea was as smooth as a mirror and the higher the sun's disc rose in the sky, the more silvery the sea became.

"How lovely it is!" Juan exclaimed with a smile.

"Just steer! Stop admiring the view and steer!" said Val sternly, rowing with all his might. "We're headed for Rock Patience."

Why was the rock called that?

Because it stood at the entrance to the bay and protected the coast from the fierce winds and stormy waves in bad weather. And when the winds abated and the breakers retreated, seagulls used to return to the rock and in a clamorous chorus now descended onto its jagged edges and now soared overhead again, spreading their snow-white wings. Perhaps it was as a tribute to its age-long service to the bay and the birds that the rock had been called Patience. At least, that was how Natasha explained it but Val thought it was an old wives' tale. However, there were seagulls, so there had to be fish, too, and Val had decided to try his luck, namely at the foot of the rock and nowhere else: to cast anchor and wait patiently like the rock. You see, this was the secret plan he had shared with Juan under the fishing boat the evening before.

"Ship oars! Drop anchor!" Val ordered himself when they reached the rock.

The rowlocks creaked for the last time and, so as not to scare the fish away, Val gently cast the anchor over the prow, and said, "Right! Now the main thing is to be quiet. Unwind the lines and give me the bait..."

Val cast his line first while Juan, taking his time, leaned overboard.

"Gosh, how deep it is! You can't even see the bottom!"

"Oh, do be quiet! We're here to fish, after all!" snapped Val.

But less than a minute later he completely forgot what he had said and started shouting as if Spartak, his favourite ice-hockey team had just scored a goal.

"Got 'em! Two of them! Look, Juan, just look what whoppers!"

Without turning his head, Juan tugged sharply at his line and started pulling it up quickly. Silver scales streaked through the water and three huge fishes were dangling on the three hooks. He skilfully took them off, threw them into the bottom of the boat, hooked on some new bait and cast his line again.

Val glanced at Juan's catch and then cast his line, too. Meanwhile the sun had already reached the top of the rock and



was getting much hotter. But the boys did not notice anything. How could they when the fish seemed to be getting hooked on purpose! No sooner had they cast their lines than they had to drag them in again. They did not even notice another boat nearby.

But then over the sea came the sound of a bugle call.

"Oh, they won't even let us fish in peace!" said Juan. "Shall we row back?"

"Pull up anchor! I'll row, you steer! Come on!"

"I want to row, too!"

"I've had more practice. You'll never match me!"

"You're a swank, Val," said Juan and started pulling up the anchor.

A minute later the boat was speeding towards the beach.

Val rowed as hard as he could but then he stole a glance at his friend and suddenly stopped. Juan was gazing over Val and Rock Patience and his eyes looked so sad that Val felt shivers up his spine.

"What's up?" he asked quietly but Juan did not reply. "Don't... You'll definitely meet your father... Mark my words..."

Coming to his senses, as it were, Juan asked, "Do you really think so, Val?"

"Yes, I do! Come on, you have a go now! You've got to be strong if anybody has!"

"Thanks," smiled Juan. "But you really do row well. I'm not a patch on you."

"Never mind, you'll learn. Let's swap round."

Juan stood up and was about to move over when all of a sudden something cracked underneath him. The rock shot up into the sky, and as he sank down, he heard Val yell somewhere far-off, "Hold on, Juan!"

Little red lights flashed before his eyes and his heart sank. And suddenly a burst of fresh air rushed into his lungs and he heard Val cry out, "Hold onto my back... Aah! Help! Help!.."

Chapter Two

"MOST URGENT. TO COLONEL DZIUBA. IN SQUARE 54/3 AT 5.42. TRANSMITTER'S LOCATION FIXED. TRANSMIS-

SION LASTED 30 SECONDS, REGION IMMEDIATELY BLOCADED, THOROUGH INSPECTION BY OPERATIONAL GROUP PRODUCED NO RESULTS. TEXT WILL BE DE-CIPHERED AND COMMUNICATED WITHOUT DELAY. CAP-TAIN PROKOFIEV."

"Square 54 stroke 3," mused Colonel Dziuba, "that sector's right by the state boarder... A transmitter was operating there for thirty seconds..."

He pressed one of the buttons on his writing desk and at once a distinct voice answered, "This is Major Kuvshinov, Comrade Colonel!"

"Has the text been deciphered yet?"

"No."

The colonel reached for the cigarette packet on the table but his hand suddenly jerked back as if recoiling from something prickly. He had given up smoking three days ago.

"Look here, Piotr Petrovich," said the colonel, "you and Lieutenant Shcheglov are going to have to deal with this matter. Will you please come over."

"Right, Comrade Colonel!"

"MOST URGENT. TO COLONEL DZIUBA. HERE IS DE-CIPHERED TEXT. 'OBJECTIVE LOCATED. BOA'. COMPLEX CIPHER, SPECIAL SYSTEM. CAPTAIN PROKOFIEV."

...When the meeting was over, Colonel Dziuba got up from the table. Tall Major Kuvshinov and stocky Lieutenant Shcheglov stood up too. Looking at them, the colonel could not help smiling for they were so like Pat and Patashon, the favourite clowns of his childhood. The telephone rang shrilly.

"Colonel Dziuba... What? Why didn't you notify us before?"

His black eyebrows knitted over the bridge of his nose, his face flushed red and a scar near his temple stood out.

"Oh, you thought this incident didn't concern you. You've got more important operational matters to attend to? Do you realise what you're saying, damn you?" he shouted.

Kuvshinov and Shcheglov exchanged surprised glances. More than once the colonel had told off men who had slipped up in their work but nobody had ever heard him use a single offensive word before. As if reading the border-guards' thoughts, he

signalled to them to sit down again. After listening silently for a minute, he calmed down and said in his usual business-like manner again, "Surname? Speak slowly and clearly." He made a note in his pad. "That's all? In future would you please notify me in time!"

He abruptly put down the receiver and then slumped heavily into his arm-chair, picked up his cigarette packet mechanically, glanced at it and then moved it further away.

"At the Bear Cub Pioneer Camp two boys nearly drowned out fishing today. It's a good thing Hilda Hoffman, a student from the international camp, happened to be nearby. But they..." he nodded towards the telephone, "they haven't even got around to working out how the accident occurred. You see, they haven't time to concern themselves with children. It's none of their business, they say, for they've got an operation to attend to. But, you know, even Dzerzhinsky found time for children, busy as he was with state affairs."

"And whereabouts did the accident happen, Vassily Ivanovich?" asked Kuvshinov.

"In square 54 stroke 3."

"But that's the same square, isn't it!" exclaimed the major.

"And at what time?" asked Lieutenant Shcheglov, throwing back his head.

"Ten minutes after the transmission," replied the colonel. Then turning round abruptly, he rapped out, "Lieutenant Shcheglov! As well as this main task I entrust you with the business of finding out all the details of this incident too!"

"Right!"

"Well, let's get started. Good luck, men!"

Chapter Three

It is pointless arguing with doctors. Val had told them he and Juan felt completely better but they stuck to their guns and insisted the boys stayed in bed and had a total rest. What's more, three times daily they had their temperatures measured and were given bitter pills. It was hell! And that day after tapping the boys all over, Faina Ivanovna, the head doctor, had said in a complaining tone, "Juan's a good boy but Val's a difficult

customer. In my opinion, the patients need more rest. Books, chess, and visits from friends are out. In a word, they must be kept in total isolation."

The nurses nodded and as soon as they had left, Val stuck his tongue out after them. Juan burst out laughing but Val lost his temper and said, "What are you laughing at? Why didn't you support me and say we were as fit as fiddles? Disciplined boy, my foot..."

"But it's fun in hospital," said Juan.

"Fun?" Val even jumped up in bed.

"Yes, fun... You couldn't understand why."

"Why couldn't I?" asked Val in surprise.

"Because never before in my life have I been in such a paradise."

"My, you're off your rocker, Juan. How can you call a hospital paradise?"

"I've forgotten what 'rocker' means. But I've already understood what your country's like. You're treated for free. All medicines are free, too. And so are meals. And they even persuade you to stay in a bit longer... No, Val, this is a real paradise. It's not like this at home..."

"Well, what is it like then?" asked Val.

"You have to pay for the treatment and for medicine and for every day you spend in hospital..."

Juan laid his arms under his head, gazed at the ceiling and started pondering something. At such moments Val tried not to disturb him and so started thinking about his team. What were they doing now? It was the rest period. The camp duty officers headed by Natasha would be keeping an eye on the dormitories. His bed was empty. Nearby Ginger Floppy-Ears was bound to be already snoring. How lucky he was, he dropped off as soon as his head touched the pillow!

There was a tap on the window-pane. Val pricked up his ears and all of a sudden someone whispered: "Hello, compaños!"

Val looked out the window and could not believe his eyes: there at the window, grinning broadly and twitching his ears was Ginger. No, he wasn't dreaming. Only Ginger could twitch his ears like that. It was a natural talent and it wasn't for nothing he was going to be a clown.

"Ginger!" Val cried and jumped out of bed.

"Ginger!" Juan exclaimed and rushed over to the window.

"Sh!" said Ginger, putting his finger to his lips. "We've nicked the gardener's ladder and dashed over here. It was all Natasha's idea. Oh, do stop tugging at my trousers!" (He said to the people down below.) "And, you know, Vassya and I have got the better of the first team... Oh, do stop tugging so hard..." Ginger slipped his hand inside his jacket: "These are for you!" he said, giving the boys an apple each. Then he twitched his ears and vanished.

A second later up popped Natasha with her pigtails and funny button nose.

"Oh, I can't tell you how happy I am! Here's a jam tart for you!"

"But we've already got everything we need!" said Val, waving his hands.

"Don't you dare turn it down! I made it myself..."

Juan carefully took the tart out of Natasha's hands, and for some reason or other started blinking and coughing.

"Does it still hurt?" Natasha asked anxiously.

"Oh, it's nothing! We're as strong as oxen," replied Val. "The doctors're keeping us here for no reason at all. Well, what's new in our team?"

"Oh, masses of things! Tanya's gone and had a row with Borya and doesn't want to see him. Borya, it seems, has fallen in love with Anya and has dedicated some verses to her..." prattled Natasha.

"I asked about the team," Val cut her short.

"Well, and what was I speaking about?" asked Natasha in surprise. "Oh, I've completely forgotten the main news. Our team's got a new vice-captain... Kolya... And Lida's been given a terrible dressing-down because of you."

"Because of us?"

"Yes, they said she didn't check over your boat properly and let one with holes go out to sea."

"Bunkum!" objected Val. "Why, we checked it over together. It was perfectly all right."

"And Uncle Petya from the rescue station was with us, too," said Juan.

"What happened then?"

"We haven't a clue ourselves..."

"Oh, do stop pulling at the ladder!" exclaimed Natasha,

grabbing hold of the window-sill with both hands. "Hang on... Come on, Ginger!.. Oh, careful!.."

Natasha's pigtails disappeared for an instant and when they reappeared, the boys caught sight of two red carnations in her hands.

Val's mouth dropped open in surprise. As for Juan—would you believe it!—he bowed and kissed Natasha's hand and her cheeks flushed the same colour as the carnations. Then she waved good-bye and vanished.

Lying in bed that evening, Val said sternly, "Listen here, Juan. Do cut out these bourgeois habits of yours like kissing girls' hands."

"You're a blockhead, Val," replied his friend, turning over to face the wall.

Chapter Four

Auntie Frosya the nurse brought the news: "Get up, sleepyheads, you've got a visitor!"

"Who on earth could it be?" asked Juan in surprise.

"Ever so beautiful she is... She's a student. The one who dragged you out of the water..."

"Hilda!" Juan exclaimed and tossed back his blanket and started shaking his friend, "Val, Val!"

But it was not very easy to wake him. In the evenings he was hard to get into bed and would toss and turn and mutter to himself for a long time but was a devil to wake in the mornings.

"Oh, do get up! She's come!"

"Mmm? What? Who has?..." mumbled Val, his eyes still closed.

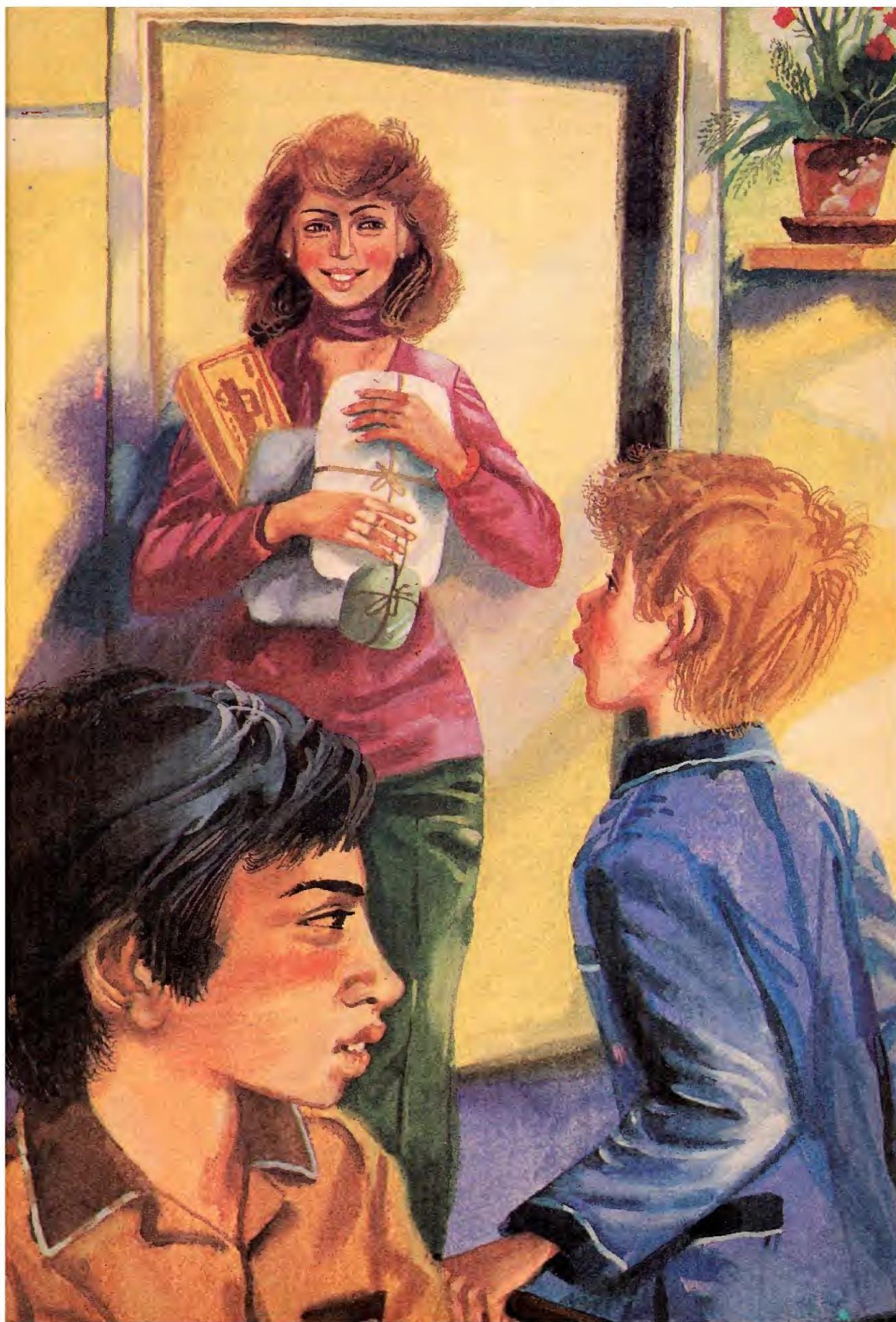
"Why, our Hilda! Do you understand—Hilda?"

At last Val got the message and exclaimed, "But we're in isolation. No visitors. Complete rest."

"Your isolation period's obviously over, laddies..." said Auntie Frosya. "Faina Ivanovna herself has allowed the student to visit you."

"Hurrah!" cried Juan, leaping out of bed.

Auntie Frosya was right: Hilda really was beautiful with her wavy golden hair cascading over her shoulders, large sparkling eyes, long eyelashes and dimples in her cheeks when she smiled.



She was carrying an armful of paper packets. To look at her delicate hands, you could hardly believe they had any strength in them. But it was namely these hands which had torn Juan free of Val whom he was clinging to and dragging down to the bottom like an anchor. First of all, she had laid the unconscious Juan down on the rough ledge and then Val had swum to the edge of the rock himself and she had dragged him out and said, "Well done!" And meanwhile a rescue launch had been racing towards them at top speed.

"If it hadn't been for Hilda, the crabs would probably be feasting on us now at the bottom of the seas, Juan," Val had said more than once. "Can you write poetry?"

"No."

"I can't either... Never mind, we'll write something in prose."

"But will she understand it?" Juan had asked doubtfully.

"Why shouldn't she! After all, she can spreken Russian all right. Hasn't a trace of an accent... You'll hear for yourself. Yes, she's bound to understand everything. We'll write a speech which'll bowl everyone over."

"Bowl them over?" asked Juan in surprise.

"Oh, that's just an expression... I'll explain later. Give me a pen and paper. Don't you worry, we'll give her a grand welcome."

But now the moment had come, they lost their heads completely and a silent scene ensued. Hilda stood in the doorway, smiling while Juan opened his mouth but could not utter a single word. Then Val prodded him in the back and he managed to stammer, "So that's what you're like!"

Val groaned because their speech was supposed to start quite differently.

"I've disappointed you, have I?" asked Hilda, screwing up her eyes slightly.

"Good heavens, no!.. No!.." protested Juan. "You're... you're ... like a good fairy in a fairy-tale..."

And then Val took over: "Don't take any notice of him... It's the salty water that's done it... He's a bit potty." And to make Hilda understand better, he twisted his finger against his temple.

"You're a bit potty yourself," snapped Juan.

But completely ignoring him, Val tossed his head back, raised his eyes to the ceiling and said solemnly, "My dear Auntie Hilda! Our hearts nearly burst with gratitude and joy..."

Val considered he was speaking eloquently while Juan felt as if he was standing next to a crowing cockerel which had caught cold. Hilda laughed so much, tears welled in her eyes. Val stuttered and then glanced first at Juan and then at Hilda...

"I think I've overdone it, haven't I?" he said confusedly. "You're not offended, are you?"

"Oh no, Val, you put it very, very well," replied Hilda, still laughing, and then added in a serious tone, "Only you don't need to make any more speeches like that. And I'm not your auntie—just call me Hilda. Agreed?"

"Agreed!"

"Well, that's splendid!" she said cheerfully, then adding sternly like a teacher at an examination, "But how long do you expect me to stand in the doorway, holding onto these packets? Come on... Take everything the good fairy's got and be quick about it! Biscuits and pies, all sweet and nice!" Then she winked so impishly at the boys, they could not help laughing...

Chapter Five

"SECRET, TO COLONEL DZIUBA, ACCLIMATIZATION GOING AS PLANNED. SHCHEGLOV."

"SECRET, TO COLONEL DZIUBA. ALL QUIET ON THE AIR.

KUVSHINOV."

* * *

"And please don't try to persuade me, Marina. I simply don't want to have anything more to do with them. Especially not with Juan. Hilda means more to him now than all the rest of us..." said Natasha, tossing her plait over her shoulder.

"I understand how you feel. Believe me, I do!" replied Marina with a sigh. "Boys! They're all the same. As soon as they meet a beautiful girl, they at once melt like ice-cream in the sun."

"Beautiful?! Beautiful?! But just look at her: her eyelashes are stuck on, her hair's most likely dyed and her eyes are as cunning as a vixen's!"

"That's right!" exclaimed Marina joyfully. "I told Ginger the same thing but he's on Val's and Juan's side. Did you notice today how they all called out 'Hilda! Hilda! Hilda!' at the top of their voices."

Yes, so they had. The whole camp had chanted "Kolya! Kolya! Kolya!" while they kept calling "Hilda!" Natasha had tugged at Val's sleeve but he had brushed her aside with his hand like an annoying fly.

"It's Hilda, don't you see?" Juan had said as pleased as Punch.

"If you ask me, these competitions are unfair," Natasha had said after a short pause. "Who ever's heard of mixed teams? I mean, girls usually compete against girls and boys against boys."

"It was Kolya's idea," explained Val. "When the students and team leaders got together, he said jokingly that they were all amateurs and not professional sportsmen and that the girls were so strong and the boys so weak, they were really equal in the end. And everyone laughed and agreed with him and decided to organise some mixed competitions."

Natasha shrugged her shoulders, not knowing how to object.

After all, Hilda really was in the lead.

The competition consisted of lighting a camp-fire with one match, quickly cooking some porridge, going straight along an azimuth, giving first-aid and, finally, hitting the target at the camp's shooting range.

The camp leaders' team were in the lead at first but then Kolya, the team's captain, let the side down by missing all ten times at the shooting range...

"Drip!" shouted Val.

"How dare you!" exclaimed Natasha indignantly. "He's our captain!.."

"Be fair, Hilda shot better," said Juan. And it was as if he had touched Natasha's face with stinging nettles for it suddenly came out in red blotches and her eyes flashed angrily. "What's the matter, Natasha?" he asked anxiously. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No, only what you thought. But ... the competition isn't over yet. The swimming relay-race's still to come. Then we'll see how good your beautiful Hilda is!" she replied, and then turned sharply and rushed off towards the sea.

Juan gazed in astonishment after her.

"Take no notice. Girls, they're all mixed up," smirked Val.
"Count yourself lucky she didn't fly at you with her nails, too."

"I see what you mean," said Juan. "They get wound up like alarm clocks and then go off ... brurrrrr..."

"That's right—brurrrr..." laughed Val.

"Come on, let's go down to the sea!"

...Lida, one of the team leaders, was in the lead. How amazing it was to see little Lida, who was so slow on dry land, shooting through the water like a rocket.

Then Natasha and Marina had suddenly appeared and Natasha had said loudly for everyone to hear, "Our boys look down in the dumps for some reason. Can't hear them shouting!"

"Got sore throats from the ice-cream they've been eating!"

Marina glanced over her shoulder at Ginger who did not seem to have heard her and was leaning towards Val and Juan and telling them something.

"Ginger! Ginger! Did you hear me?!"

But Ginger's ears seemed to be stuffed with cottonwool.

"All right, then..." said Marina angrily. "That's the end of our friendship."

Ginger suddenly looked as if he had been pricked with a needle. Marina saw the startled expression in his eyes and the freckles dancing on his face.

"Why ... have you gone bonkers!.. Fancy talking about that in front of everyone. The lads'll laugh at me. You know..." Ginger started whispering.

But Marina interrupted him in mid-sentence, "Oh, you coward, you pathetic coward! Don't you dare touch me, you traitor! I don't want to have anything more to do with you!.. Push off with your chums and run after your Hilda..."

Ginger's eyes goggled and he was about to say something but all the children suddenly started chanting, "Kolya! Kolya!"

"Hilda! Hilda! Hilda!" cried the students, Val and Juan loudest of all.

Natasha and Marina exchanged glances and started carefully making their way through the ring of supporters towards the exit. Ginger gazed after them, twitching his ears.

...It was the decisive moment in the competitions between the mixed students' and Pioneer leaders' teams: the swimming relay-race. The final lap was being swum by Hilda for the

students and Kolya for the leaders. Kolya seized hold of the baton and plunged into the water while Hilda impatiently waited by the start and then tore the striped baton out of her sluggish partner's hand and dived under the water. She emerged already level with Kolya, drew a deep breath, made two strong strokes and took the lead...

"Hurrah!" roared her supporters on the shore.

"Well done, Hilda!" cried Val and gave Juan an almighty slap on the back.

But so intent was Juan on the race that he did not seem to feel the blow. Ginger was preoccupied with his sports shoes for he had suddenly discovered that one of his laces had come untied.

Chapter Six

Marina had no time for Ginger because she was always busy carrying out the important tasks entrusted to her by the chairman of her team's committee. Whereas before she had been a terrible chatterbox, she now spoke in telephesephese, ending every phrase with dots and dashes, and for some reason or other always went about with pouted lips, totally ignoring Ginger. And he, poor thing, leaned over backwards to do anything as long as it pleased her. But nothing helped. And then all of a sudden she came up to him herself—mind you, still looking the other way.

"It'll be Natasha's birthday soon. But it's a secret. Got it?" And then she called to her girl-friends, "Wait, I'm going with you!"

Ginger was sure he was good at keeping secrets and would not break his word, come what may. This was as far as enemies were concerned but Val and Juan were friends. So why should he keep secrets from friends?

"Hey! I've got some important news!" he called out to them.

He found Val and Juan at their headquarters in a large cave concealed to a casual passer-by's eye in a rock by the water's edge. The boys had camouflaged the entrance with brambles, they had pricked all their fingers gathering them.

"Out with it then!" demanded Val after Ginger had squatted down on his heels by their camp-fire and got his breath back.

"It's Natasha's birthday!"

"Is that all?" asked Val in surprise.

"How do you know?" inquired Juan.

"From a reliable source... Marina told me herself..."

"But you've had a row with her. You told us yourself you weren't on speaking terms. So how come she's told you?" asked Val suspiciously.

"Well, it's true, we have had a row and all because of your glorious Hilda! I can't stand her, the painted doll!"

Juan compressed his lips, raised his fists and stepped towards Ginger.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" yelled Val, leaping between them. "Keep your cool!"

Val liked this expression which he had recently read in some book or other.

"Come on, keep your cool!" he repeated sternly. "It'll be Natasha's birthday soon... She might be a terrible bore but she is one of us. Let's work out a plan..."

Chapter Seven

Hilda appeared unexpectedly the next morning, rising out of the sea like a mermaid and waving her hand amicably, "Hello, boys!"

"Hello, Hilda!" Juan and Val called back warmly.

Hilda swam like a dolphin. The students' beach was about three kilometres away but this was no distance for her. After swimming some way, she would dive under and disappear. One moment she was very close and the next, far out at sea. Then she would come back, lie down next to the boys on the warm pebbles, rest her arms under her head, expose her face to the sun and ask, "Well, what's new in the camp?"

She knew about everything going on in the summer camp and was always present at all the events. One day while watching the children learning to make a rolling sound on a drum, she asked if she could have a go and then picked up the sticks, tapped the drum a few times but could not get it to roll. Val wanted to show her how but she said she would manage on her own. And, sure enough, an hour later she had taught herself wonderfully well. Then she learnt to beat an alarm and play a march. The children looked on open-mouthed. Yes, you had to admit, Hilda was



certainly quick off the mark. All the children liked her, except Natasha and Marina, that is, who tried to avoid her. But what could you expect? They could not even dream of doing half of what she could so why did they put on airs?

Take the amusing obstacle races: Hilda jumped further than anyone else. True, the children almost split their sides laughing.

"She's just like a kangaroo," exclaimed Ginger.

"You mean, you are!" retorted Juan, taking umbrage for some reason.

"We'll have to enroll you in the Young Pioneer organisation, Hilda," Kolya the team leader told her.

"Really? Oh, I'd be only too pleased to join," Hilda replied. "I've never been a Pioneer. How wonderful it is to live in a camp like this! There's nothing like this in my country..."

"How come you know Russian so well then?" asked Marina.

"Russian? Oh, it's my favourite language," replied Hilda. "I took a course and then worked as a guide at an international exhibition in Moscow for two years. Yes, I think I know it a little..."

"A little, my foot," Ginger whispered to Marina. "Why, she hasn't got a trace of an accent... Gosh, she's brainy! She is, isn't she, Marina?"

But Marina merely shrugged her shoulders.

Chapter Eight

"Any news from Kuvshinov and Shcheglov?" asked the colonel after greeting the officer on duty.

The latter would have been pleased to tell him the news as he knew how impatiently Dziuba was waiting for it but there was no news, neither good nor bad.

"Any more broadcasts?"

"No, none, Vassily Ivanovich," replied the officer. "Seems to have vanished into thin air!"

"Into thin air?" asked the colonel, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, just a figure of speech," explained the officer.

"Well, it's ... but what if it's not air but water?..." the colonel asked pensively. "Vanished into water! Yes, that might very well be it!"

"What do you mean, Vassily Ivanovich?" asked the officer, puzzled.

"Oh, nothing," replied the colonel and then ordered, "Tell Kuvshinov to contact me at once!"

* * *

Instead of swimming over to the boys as usual, Hilda rolled up one morning in a taxi, found Lida, one of the team-leaders and explained something to her. The latter smiled and nodded.

"Hey, Juan, Lida's calling for you!" shouted the camp duty officer from up above.

You could tell at once what a lazybones the duty officer was for he was shouting from the top of the hill instead of coming down to the beach to fetch him.

"Don't be long..." Val called after him. "Hilda's going to be here any moment now... It's time to go for a dip... So be as quick as you can!"

* * *

"Whose car is that?" shouted Kolya, leaning out of the radio room window.

"It's a taxi... Hilda's come for Juan," Lida called as she ran along.

"What's that you said?!" Kolya exclaimed and then jumped nimbly out of the window, caught Lida up and barred her way.

"Hang on, will you..."

Lida gazed in surprise at his stockily-built frame in shorts, peeling nose and the red tie on his checked shirt. Yes, he was just like a Pioneer boy. And fancy jumping out of the window, too! What a good thing it was all the children were on the beach...

"Oh, do explain things properly... Where's Juan got to?"

"Look, in plain and simple language: he's gone to town with Hilda!"

"Gone to town... And you let him?"

"Well, why not? Why shouldn't he do some sightseeing? Are you against it?"

"Of course not ... only... don't you..."

"Only what? Don't I what?"

"It's just that I... Oh well, let him have a walk round..."

And he sprang back through the window like a hare.

Lida shrugged her shoulders, pulled up a blade of grass, bit through its stalk and walked along the path to the sea. Her team would be going swimming in a few minutes' time.

* * *

Juan had not laughed so much in years! The circus! The clowns walked along a tightrope, jumped into a net from the top of the dome and did all sorts of tricks, telling jokes all the time. And the audience roared with laughter at whatever they said...

And then Hilda and he had some delicious ice-cream with cherry jam.

And then Hilda said, "Just you sit here on the bench and wait a while. Here's a magazine with some pictures to keep you busy. I'll pop round to the shops and then we'll go into the park and ride on the merry-go-round. All right?"

"Fine!" replied Juan cheerfully.

He had not finished leafing through half the magazine when Hilda was back again.

"I've done my shopping and finished off all my chores," she said. "But our trip's not over yet. Give me your hand, chum. Right, as they say in your camp, put your best foot forward!"

...After the merry-go-round they went over to the shooting gallery.

"Oh, I can see you're not a bad shot at all!" said Hilda when Juan hit an open-mouthed wolf and turned it upside down.

"It's my duty to shoot well," said Juan.

"Your duty? To whom?"

"To our common cause," Juan replied in a whisper, glancing round.

And Hilda involuntarily glanced round, too.

After leaving the shooting gallery, they wandered through the park, chose a bench under a branchy oak and sat down for a rest.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Hilda recollected suddenly. "Here ... take this ... it's for Natasha..." And she handed a small bundle to Juan.

"For Natasha?" he gasped, his eyes widening and his cheeks flushing and giving him away.

"Yes, it can be your birthday present to her..."

"But how do you know about her birthday?" asked Juan, even more surprised.

"I just do," said Hilda, smiling, "there's no such thing as secrets between friends... Isn't that how your friend, Val, puts it?"

"Yes... But it doesn't seem right for me to give her something..." said Juan confusedly. "The whole team's clubbed together to get her a large cake and we're going to sing a song to her..."

"Well, that's from everyone but this is from you... You see? From you!"

"Yes, I see but do you think it's a good idea?" Juan asked doubtfully again.

"It's always a good thing to give presents," Hilda reassured him. "Natasha deserves a special present. She's a wonderful friend and a very beautiful girl..."

"Really!?" exclaimed Juan.

"Yes, really, Juan," said Hilda with a smile. "I like her very much! If you ask me, she's the best girl in the camp. Don't you agree?"

And then she hugged Juan's shoulders, leaned over and gazed into his eyes. And so dazzlingly blue were her eyes that it hurt him to look into them. He blinked and suddenly burst into tears, buried his face in her shoulder and she tenderly stroked his head.

"You, you ... look so like my mother..." he said between sobs.

"Poor little lad..." whispered Hilda. "You've never spoken to me about your mother ... and never even mentioned your father."

"Well ... one day I definitely will... Yes, I really will!" promised Juan.

And tears kept pouring out of his eyes and rolling down his cheeks.

Chapter Nine

Juan thought his friends would be delighted at his presents.

"Please help yourselves, compañeros!" he said jovially, offering the box of sweets to Val and Ginger.

But instead of replying, Val smirked scornfully and Ginger averted his eyes and turned away.

"What's happened to you?" asked Juan in surprise. "Please tell me."

Val spat through his teeth, shoved his hands in his pockets and turned his back on Juan and Ginger did the same.

"They're upset Hilda took me and not them to town," Juan decided. "Well, let them be huffy—so what!.. But Natasha's different... She'll be very happy today."

Finding a suitable moment that evening as Natasha was running to a team council meeting, Juan stopped her and said with an enigmatic smile, "Natasha, I want to give you a present!"

"What sort of present?"

"Let's go down to the sea," he suggested.

"Look, I haven't time to go strolling with you. We've got a council meeting..."

"What about afterwards then?.."

"Well... I don't know," replied Natasha hesitatingly and shrugged her shoulders.

"Come to the old boat. I'll be waiting for you there! You will come, won't you?"

Natasha tossed her plait over her shoulder, gave Juan a rather mystified stare and ran off.

Juan could not decide whether she would turn up or not but he resolved to wait by the boat just in case...

"Well, what have you thought up this time?" asked Natasha, running up after the meeting.

She climbed onto the bottom of the upturned boat and Juan stood next to her.

"Close your eyes!" he ordered.

"Why?"

"You'll see in a moment... Look, earrings... They're for your birthday from me but I'm giving them to you now because I don't want the others to see." Juan faltered and then added, "And from Hilda, too..."

"From Hilda?" Natasha repeated.

She brought the earrings up close to her eyes and they flashed in the moonlight like two little fireflies and then suddenly vanished, and before Juan had time to come to his senses, they were back in his hands again.

"What's wrong? Don't you like them?" he asked in fright.

"Of course, I do," she replied. "Very much, in fact ... it's just that..."

"What?"

"It's just that you and your Hilda... Why, you're mad!"

"What?"

"You heard me... You're mad!" she said and then bit her tongue.

Close-by she glimpsed a very pale unfamiliar face and a pair of spiteful eyes. Juan swung his arm and with all his might hurled the two little stones into the water with a splash.

"Juan ... why did you do that? You misunderstood me. I'm not old enough to wear earrings..." Natasha began saying.

But instead of stopping to listen to her, he turned sharply and ran off.

* * *

The moon had stopped peering inquisitively through the window and had hidden behind the clouds but Juan was still wide awake. He tossed from side to side and tried counting to a thousand but all in vain. How could he possibly go to sleep when he had lost all his friends—Ginger, Val and Natasha—in one day. All of them? What about Hilda? Yes, Hilda was a real friend. In the morning he would tell her everything on the beach and she would understand. She was kind and clever like his mother... But what about her request? He could spend all day telling not only Hilda but his other friends too, about his parents. But whenever they tried to get him to speak, he fell silent.

"I've no right to tell you about my mother and father while a struggle's going on in my country," he used to tell them. "That's an order!"

"Whose?" Val would ask sceptically.

"Our Revolutionary Committee's! One unnecessary word could cause our underground to suffer."

"But Ginger and I won't tell a soul!" Val used to promise. "Do you really not believe us?"

"Of course, I do, Val! But an order's an order."

"Oh, why do you keep saying that! If you ask me, Juan, you're fibbing!"

"I always tell the truth!"

"And so it's by an order of the Revolutionary Committee that you're now studying at a boarding-school here, is it?" smirked Val.

"That's right, you've guessed," replied Juan without batting an eyelid. "It was indeed by an order of the Revolutionary Committee that I was sent to study in Moscow."

"But what about the struggle and the underground?" retorted Val with a chuckle.

Juan glanced scornfully up and down Val, and then said, "I didn't think there were fools like you in your country, Val!"

"Knock-out!" intervened Ginger who had so far kept quiet. "Serves him right, Juan! Well done!"

"Just you belt up!" said Val, flying off the handle. "This is politics—something you couldn't understand!"

"Oh, and you reckon you can, right?" fumed Ginger. "Well, you don't. It's as easy as ABC: after they've won their fight, they've got to build a new life. See? And run factories, treat sick people and build schools and Pioneer camps. And to do this, they need personnel. I'm right, aren't I, Juan?"

"Absolutely! The revolution needs not only devoted and clever people but educated ones, too! That's why everyone who's studying, is carrying on a fight, too. And it takes a clever person to realise this..."

"Come on, easy does it!" Val butted in. "You've only just learnt to speak Russian but you're already trying to make out you're a brain-box."

"What's a 'brain-box'?" Juan asked confusedly.

Val and Ginger exchanged glances and burst out laughing. Juan looked suspiciously first at one and then at the other and laughed, too.

* * *

He recalled all this as he lay in bed.

"No, Hilda won't feel hurt," he decided, as he dropped off to sleep. "She's not like Val or Ginger or even Natasha. Hilda'll understand me... I can't give away a revolutionary secret. Once the fascist junta's been overthrown, I'll tell them all about my mother and father... Yes, then I'll tell Hilda, my friends and all the rest of the world..."

Chapter Ten

What would Juan tell them?

...That morning his mother got up very early as usual, quickly got out some cottage cheese for breakfast and made a lentil soup for dinner and then said with a sigh, "What's to be done if we can't afford anything else now. We ought to count ourselves lucky, I haven't been kicked out of the factory yet. I may only get a miserable wage but thousands of others don't even have that these days."

Juan was about to leap out of bed but his mother stopped him and said, "No, lie in for a while, darling... You don't have to hurry to school now. And you'll have time to tidy things later."

Then she kissed Juan and hurried off to the tobacco factory.

His school had been closed down... One day an officer with a long black moustache had appeared at school and Juan had at once nicknamed him "cockroach". After ordering all the children and teachers to assemble in the gymnasium, he had stridden out into the centre and said, "For political reasons, lessons at your school are to be discontinued until further notice."

The children had shifted from one foot to the other and glanced confusedly at their teachers who looked away and hung their heads.

"What, are you deaf?" the cockroach began roaring. "The school is closed!"

Juan had not been to school since. The school building was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and a sentry in a steel helmet was posted at the entrance. Rumour had it that it was being used as a camp of some sort...

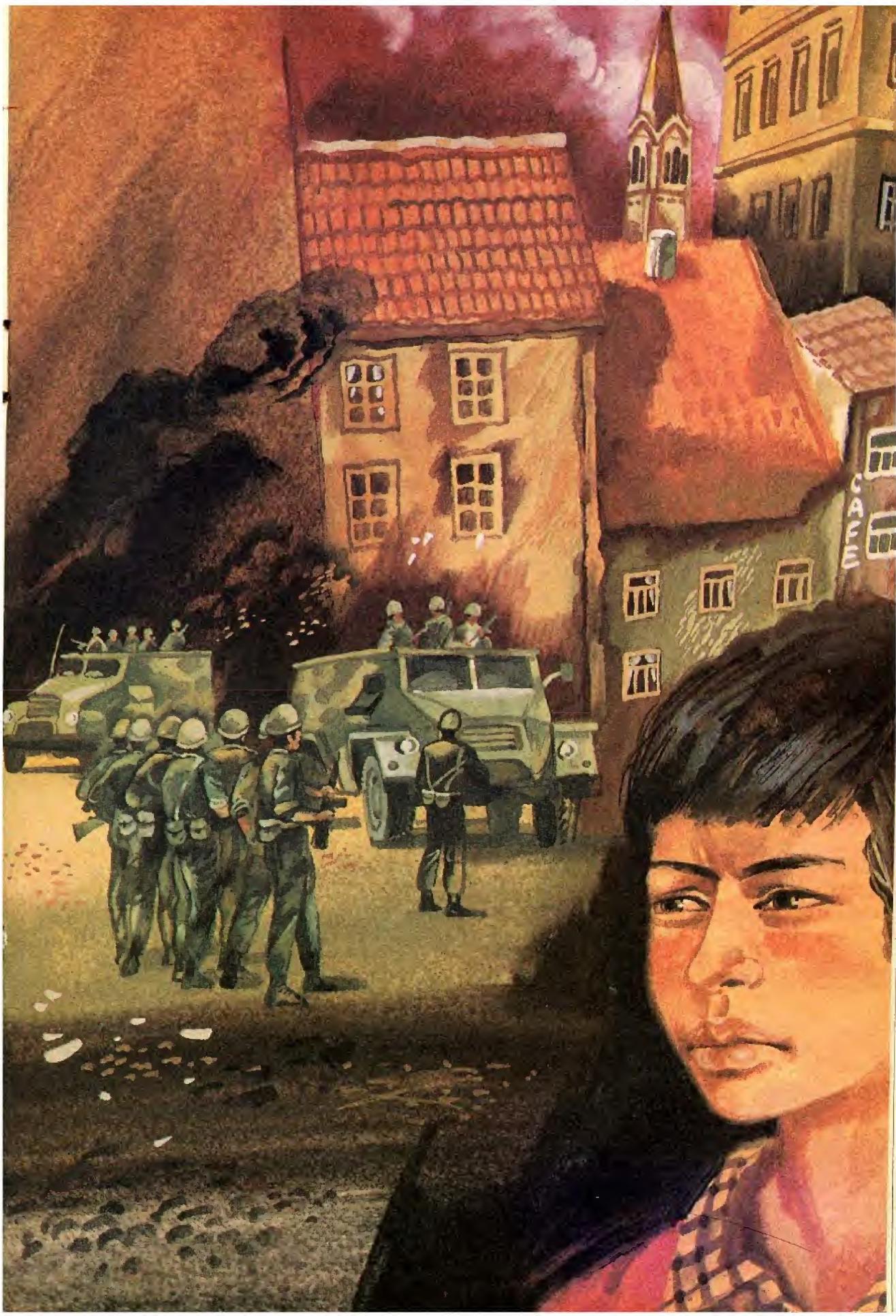
Juan's thoughts were interrupted by his friend Manuel shouting his name under the window.

What a voice! It was as loud as a trumpet. Manuel was used to shouting. In fact, he made a living from it: you see, he shouted the news from the newspapers all day long and if you didn't shout loud enough, you wouldn't earn a penny. Yes, how lucky he was he had a job!...

"News! A sensation!" yelled Manuel.

"What sort of news?" asked Juan, flinging open the window.

"Here, read for yourself!" replied Manuel, tossing up a newspaper which Juan nimbly caught.



"On the front page!" shouted Manuel, dashing down the winding street at break-neck speed.

"Sensational announcement by the new authorities!" shouted Manuel already a long way off.

"What announcement?" wondered Juan. He unfolded the newspaper, glanced at the front page and his hands started shaking.

"Dad! My dad!"

His father was beaming at him from a large photograph and underneath a caption in large print read: "Wanted! Dangerous state criminal, leader of the Revolutionary Committee of so-called popular avengers: Rodriguez Cheveredo... A reward of 10,000 pesos for his capture, dead or alive!"

"Well I never! So my dad's the Revolutionary Committee's leader!" thought Juan and started leaping up and down with joy. All the little boys in the street were bound to go green with envy.

"For his capture, dead or alive..." Juan stopped dead in mid-sentence. Only then did the awful message of the announcement dawn on him. "Dead or alive ... a reward of 10,000 pesos!" And mother had said he was doing some timber work up in the mountains and would be coming home soon...

"I must run to the factory and tell her at once..." decided Juan.

But there was no need to, for the next moment his mother was in the room with him. He did not recognise her at first because her face was waxen and her lips blue.

"Mother! Haven't you been to work?" Juan gasped in astonishment but she did not reply.

"Look what's written about our dad... He's a top revolutionary..."

And he handed her the newspaper but, without even glancing at it, she rushed over to the wardrobe and started quickly rummaging through things.

"What's the matter, mum?"

"I'll explain everything later. Later, darling," she replied and went on quickly hunting for something. "But now we've got to leave as quickly as possible. They may come here any moment now..."

"Who?"

"The fascists... They're after your father... And me."

A siren started howling outside. Mother cautiously crept up to the window and saw several cars already standing by the house.

"It's too late..." she said. "They've surrounded the whole area..."

Biting her lip, she thought for a few moments and then said resolutely, "There's still one way-out ... through the attic... Remember this address: five, Martini Street, by the rubbish dump. Ask for Uncle Emile. Got it?"

"Five, Martini, by the dump, ask for Uncle Emile," Juan repeated automatically.

"Here, take this," she said, removing a wax-sealed packet from under her blouse. "Hold it tight, son. It's not just an ordinary packet... The life of your father and his comrades is in your hands. And so is the life of our Revolution!"

The cars screeched to a halt by their entrance.

"Run... Quick! Into the kitchen ... and up the ladder... quick, darling."

He could not even remember whether she had had time to kiss him goodbye.

He crawled across the roof-tops on his stomach, and heard shots ringing out more and more often behind: some people had come to his mother's aid and went on firing until they ran out of ammunition. He learnt this later from Uncle Emile.

As long as he lived, Juan would never forgive himself for having left her alone. Oh, if only it had happened now... But what could you expect from a little nincompoop like him then? He could not even say goodbye to his mother at the funeral because the junta had already started hunting for him, too... And he so longed to fall on his mother's breast and cry, "Mummy! Mummy!"

* * *

Juan was awoken by a dig in the ribs. It was already light and he could see Val's frightened face above him.

"What are you shouting for?"

"Me? Oh, it's nothing. I just had a nightmare. Is it already time to get up?"

"No, the sun isn't up yet. Look—its rays are only just rising over the sea."

Juan sat up in bed and Val sat down beside him and they started watching the sunrise. Val coughed, glanced askance at Juan and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be angry with me," he whispered quietly so as not to wake Ginger.

Juan turned towards him. Val was looking at him gravely and without blinking, and Juan could not help smiling. Then Val frowned.

"Oh, Val, Val," said Juan, no longer smiling. "What a good fellow you are!"

Chapter Eleven

Marina told Natasha in confidence that Kolya was head over heels in love with Hilda.

"Well, you've certainly surprised me!" said Natasha indignantly. "Fancy our Kolya liking that ... painted doll... Now, if you'd said Lida..."

"Oh, how can you possibly compare Lida to Hilda? Lida's just a young girl like you and me but Hilda's a beautiful woman. Anyway, it's not just Kolya: all our boys are madly in love with her... Especially your Juan... Don't you believe me?"

But Natasha turned away without saying a word and started plaiting and unbraiding her hair.

"Last night," continued Marina, "I saw Kolya and Hilda strolling through the park together... And in the mornings they meet by the old boat behind the rocks... You reckon that's gossip? No, I'm quite sure it's not."

"Oh, you're such a chatter-box! And you're so fond of making mountains out of mole hills!"

"Oh, it's like that, is it? Mountains out of mole hills?.. Come on then... You can hide under the boat and hear everything for yourself."

"Whatever will you think up next!"

Not only Marina but also the boys had started noticing that whereas before as soon as she swam up, Hilda, used to run over to Juan and Val whom she had saved, she now spent more and more time with Kolya. They would whisper about something and then dive into the water, and swim out very far or go boating together for a very long time.

* * *

Being a team leader isn't easy. You're on your feet from morning until night. It was now really time for Kolya to have a rest but he still had to draw up a work plan for the next day, hold a political news meeting, run the radio club and help put out the broadsheet. What's more, the day after next the team was going off on a hike and he still had to work out the route, decide where they would be spending the night and write out each group's time-table. And on top of all this, he still had to call into the boys' dormitory because they had been suspiciously quiet after lights-out. No doubt they were flinging their pillows from wall to wall and Val was making a beard like Father Christmas's on sleepy Ginger's face with toothpaste.

Someone tapped quickly on the door.

"Come in!" called Kolya. "Lida? Great! Now we can make some coffee and have a cup each."

But Lida shook her head and stood still in the doorway.

"What's up? Has something happened?"

"Yes."

"With the children?" asked Kolya anxiously.

"No, with you!"

"With me?"

"Yes, with you. The others say it's hypnosis. They reckon she's hypnotized you..."

"Look, just wait a minute," interrupted Kolya. "Come in here and talk sense... What hypnosis, who's hypnotized me?"

"Oh, he doesn't know who! My, come in here, everybody, and see how blissfully innocent he is!"

"But honest, I don't."

"Your Hilda! Yes, yes! Stop goggling! Hilda, who you whisper sweet nothings to behind the rocks on the beach and stroll about with in the park in front of all the children. Perhaps you're going to invite her on the hike with us, too?"

"Why not?" said Kolya with a smile. "That's an idea. She's great at sports and would be a great help. She's good at..."

But without waiting to hear what Hilda was good at, Lida turned and stalked out.

Chapter Twelve

"So you say, there's been another transmission?" said Colonel Dziuba, livening up.

"Yes, Vassily Ivanovich. There has, damn it!" replied the officer on duty with a grin. "It lasted three minutes and occurred in the square 111/13. Here's an electronic deciphering of the text and the reply to it."

"Right... So, we haven't scared off Boa. It's been on the air again." The colonel rubbed his hands together with glee. "Well then, let's have your file with the deciphered code and see what surprise our Boa has in store for us."

"BOA TO SHARK. LOAD READY FOR EVACUATION. REPORT TIME AND PLACE OF TRANSMISSION".

"SHARK TO BOA. PLACE AND TIME WILL REPORT IN NEXT BROADCAST".

"Yes, fine names they've chosen for themselves," remarked Dziuba, closing the file.

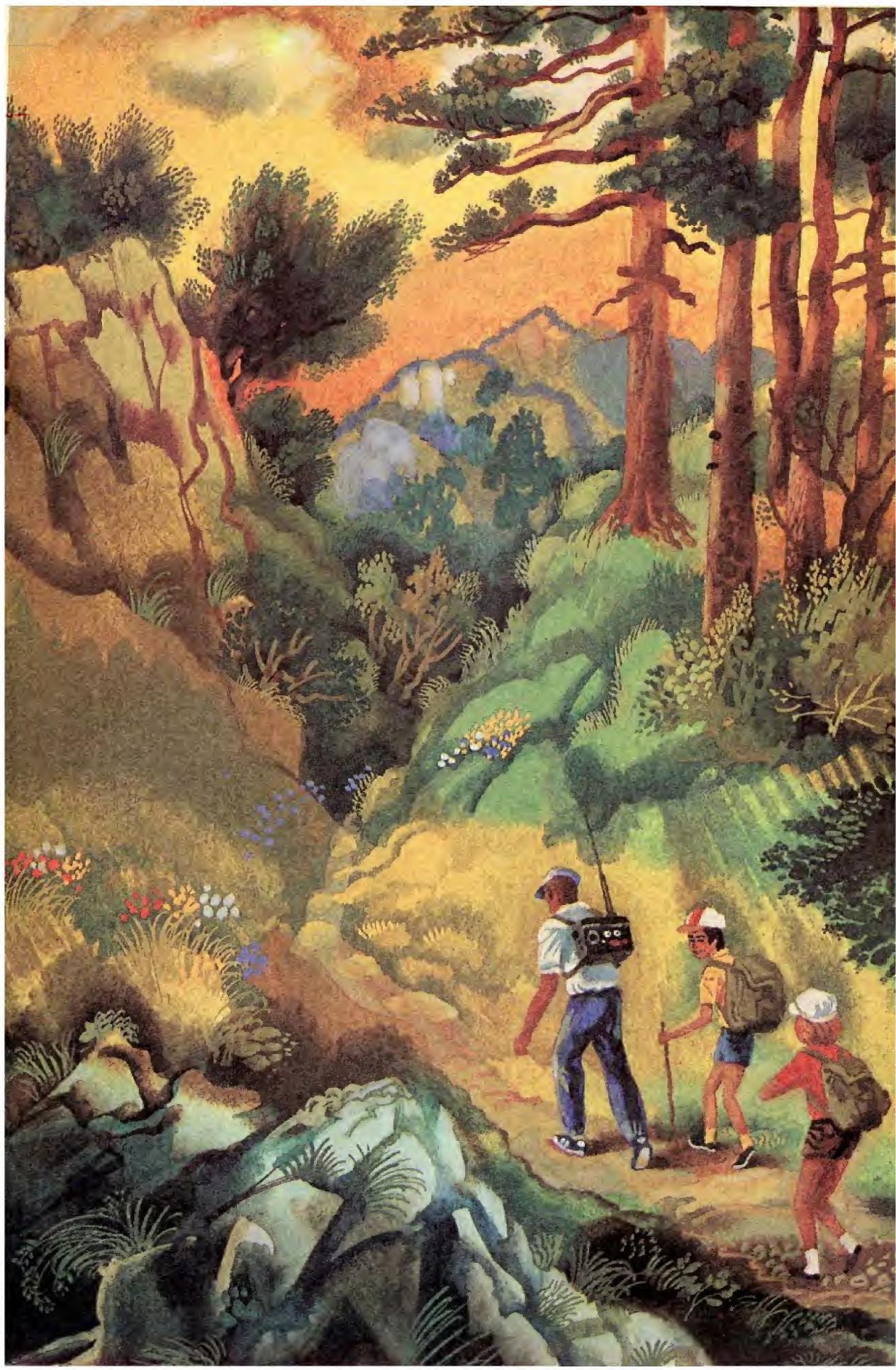
A red lamp started blinking on the switchboard. The colonel lifted the receiver and said, "Yes... A message from Shcheglov? Bring it to me at once!"

"SECRET. MOST URGENT. TO COLONEL DZIUBA. BOA DISCOVERED. REQUEST PERMISSION TO ARREST. LIEUTENANT SHCHEGLOV".

"Certainly not!" exclaimed the colonel. "The game's only just begun!" Then turning to the officer on duty, he ordered, "Wire the following to Shcheglov: "CONTINUE OBSERVATION. NO INDEPENDENT ACTION. BOA MUST BE CAUGHT IN THE ACT!"

* * *

A narrow path ran from one hillock to the next. The team had been hiking for two days. The children were walking along in a file behind their leader, Kolya, who was carrying a transmitter on his back. Hilda brought up the rear. At the very last moment



before the hike Lida had suddenly gone down with a heavy cold and the doctors, suspecting it was flu, had forbidden her to go hiking. Hilda had gladly accepted the invitation to replace her and was now walking with the rest of the team. Although her rucksack was heavy, she walked spritely along and switched music on every time they stopped for a rest. She had an excellent transistor which picked up all the stations. You only had to twiddle the dial and marches, waltzes and songs in many different languages would blare all over the woods.

"What a fantastic set!" exclaimed Ginger admiringly, turning the dial with Hilda's permission.

Once, hearing some such loud music, Natasha lost her temper and yelled, "One ought to listen to something else in the woods! But she goes and tunes into jazz..."

Marina nodded and the two friends walked away from the rest, climbed into a hollow, sat down on a fallen tree and started listening to the birds' songs.

"There's a cuckoo!" said Natasha. "It's only a little bird but its loud voice carries right through the woods."

"Cuckoo, cuckoo!" cried Marina. "Tell me how many years I'm going to live!"

And the cuckoo replied: ten, fifteen...

"That's not many," laughed Marina. "Go on, add some more!"

But the cuckoo was silent.

"And those are sand-martins singing up there," said Natasha. "What cheerful and rich voices they have! Lucky things, spending all their life in the sky... They don't even know how to walk on the ground. And that's a woodpecker tapping away. Hear it?"

"Yes."

"And that's its mate flying up to it."

"Nobody's flown up to you, have they?" asked Marina sympathetically.

"Who do you mean?"

"Oh, stop pretending, Natasha! I know you're upset about your row with Juan."

For a while Natasha pretended to listening to the woodpecker and then admitted, "Yes, I am upset. We only say 'hello' and 'good night' to each other these days. And now look, the moment we've stopped for a break, he's got out his notebook and started scribbling away. I'd love to know what he's writing."

"Ginger told me he's decided to keep a diary but won't show it to anyone. And anyway ... after that letter he got, he's hardly talked to anyone at all..."

"What letter?" asked Natasha, puzzled.

"Why, hasn't he told you? I thought he'd have told you if anyone about it."

Marina drew closer to her friend and hugged her round the shoulders.

"What was the letter about?" asked Natasha.

"I don't really know. Ginger says it had a beautiful stamp on it. He asked him to give it to him for his collection but Juan refused and wouldn't say who it was from."

"Yes... That is odd..." said Natasha pensively.

"Well, what did I say? First this letter and then a secret diary. Yes, I smell a rat!"

* * *

"I smell a rat!" said Val when Ginger told him about the letter.

Ginger himself had given Juan the blue envelope with the triangular stamp of a palm tree and a blue sky and Juan had grabbed it and rushed off somewhere without listening to what Ginger was saying about the stamp.

"We must find out exactly what's going on but keep our cool!" concluded Val.

Juan was sitting on the pebbles and gazing at the lazy waves, which were gently playing with the stones by the water's edge and then reluctantly rolling back again.

"Hey, Juan!" said Val, slapping him on the back. "Who have you heard from?"

Juan started.

"Stop being snooty and tell us. We're friends, after all," said Ginger.

But Juan slowly stood up and started walking along the shore without even glancing at the boys. Val whistled in astonishment and Ginger's ears started wagging up and down.

The boys again tried quizzing Juan during the hike but he merely snapped, "It's a secret!", picked up his bowl of porridge, and marched off.

"Would you believe it... A conspirator in our midst!" said Val offended.

"Well, he can keep quiet for all I care," Ginger retorted and stuffed his mouth full of porridge.

* * *

Kolya had put Juan and Natasha in charge of the camp-fire until midnight. Marina was sure Natasha would ask for another shift but she had agreed. And now they were both sitting by the fire. All around it was completely quiet except for the babbling sound of the stream somewhere nearby. Unlike in the camp, on a hike the team leaders did not have to give dressing-downs after lights-off because the children slept like logs, and would not wake up even if you dragged them out of their tents. It was no joke walking ten kilometres a day with all that hiking gear—tents, tin cans, buckets, pots and first-aid kits—on your back! By the end of the day even your compass seemed to weigh heavily in your hand. You had to climb up and downhill, digging your heels in. Everyone was dead tired, and even trained sportsmen like Kolya and Hilda were sound asleep now.

Natasha poked a stick about in the fire and sparks flew straight up into the sky. The twigs were crackling and Juan sat very close to the flames, trying to read a book. They had not said a word to each other although, according to Natasha's watch, half an hour had already passed. At last feeling she had had enough, she said, "Is that book really so interesting, it's worth spoiling your eyesight?"

"Yes, it is very interesting... It's about my father..." replied Juan, without taking his eyes off the book.

"About your father?" Natasha stopped twiddling the stick in the fire. "Who gave it to you?"

"Kolya." Juan put it down on his lap and stared at the fire. The bright flame lit up his pensive face, sad eyes and very long eyelashes—the envy of any girl.

"Read it to me," Natasha asked quietly.

Juan lifted the book slowly and started reading: "If someone could describe all the horror of this dead house's life, of the struggle and spells of depression and optimism of those immured

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here to undergo torture, and if someone were to reproduce what is going on in the hearts of the heroes incarcerated here, and in the hearts of the ordinary base creatures around them, and what is going on in the hearts of the condemned being led to execution, then the life of this house and its inmates would become a very vital weapon in the struggle that lies ahead...”

The further Juan read, the firmer his voice became. He hammered out every word and, it seemed to Natasha, his shoulders grew broader and his hands stronger.

“We shall overcome! And even though only very rarely you may glimpse a smile on my face, I am convinced the ideas and the movement in which I am living and working will win a victory. Today it is a dance of life and death—the moment of a truly bloody battle, of titanic efforts...”

He stopped reading and glanced at Natasha and she saw the fire’s flickering flame reflected in his large black eyes.

The fire went out. Juan looked down and then hurried over to a pile of brushwood, picked up an armful and threw it on the burning hot coals, and sparks again flew up to the sky with a crackle.

“Who’s the book by?” asked Natasha after a long pause.

“Dzerzhinsky.”

“Dzerzhinsky,” echoed Natasha. “Felix Edmundovich. Our Young Pioneer Organisation’s first leader. A true knight of the Revolution.”

“Yes, well said, Natasha!” said Juan joyfully. “A knight of the Revolution like my dad now, like I want to be when I grow up... Oh, if only the day would come soon!”

“Don’t worry, it will!” said Natasha with a smile.

She moved the stick in the fire and suddenly asked, “And was that letter from your father?”

Juan turned sharply and looked mistrustfully at her. Then he sighed, looked down and said in an undertone, “Don’t ask me about that. I’ll tell you everything later on. Understand?..”

“Yes... I understand everything. I’m not such a silly little twit as you think.”

She frowned and Juan smiled.

here to undergo torture, and if someone were to reproduce what is going on in the hearts of the heroes incarcerated here, and in the hearts of the ordinary base creatures around them, and what is going on in the hearts of the condemned being led to execution, then the life of this house and its inmates would become a very vital weapon in the struggle that lies ahead...”

The further Juan read, the firmer his voice became. He hammered out every word and, it seemed to Natasha, his shoulders grew broader and his hands stronger.

“We shall overcome! And even though only very rarely you may glimpse a smile on my face, I am convinced the ideas and the movement in which I am living and working will win a victory. Today it is a dance of life and death—the moment of a truly bloody battle, of titanic efforts...”

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Chapter Thirteen

"MOST URGENT. OF SPECIAL IMPORTANCE. TO COLONEL DZIUBA. HERE IS DECIPHERED TEXT OF RADIO TRANSMISSION FROM SQUARE 111/13 AT 02:20: SHARK TO BOA. FORECAST FOR FRIDAY: DENSE FOG. CALM AT SEA. TRANSFER LOAD TO LIAISON IN SQUARE 8/9. PASSWORD AT TRANSFER: DO YOU LIKE OYSTERS? YOUR REPLY: I PREFER SQUIDS. REPEAT EXPLICIT ORDER: LOAD MUST BE UNHARMED. GOOD LUCK.

"BOA TO SHARK. ORDER RECEIVED.

"BROADCAST LASTED 2 MINUTES. CAPTAIN PROKOFIEV."

* * *

Val had no idea why he woke up in the middle of the night. Perhaps the door had creaked or he had had a nightmare? He fumbled on his bedside table for a torch and shone it at the window. It was open and looming outside was an impenetrable wall of fog. Ginger was fast asleep next to him. As usual Juan's head was tucked under the blankets and his feet were sticking out. How odd! He could see Juan's pillow and blanket but not his feet. He shone the torch again, got up and touched the bed with his hands. Yes, he was right, Juan wasn't there!

"Ginger, Ginger," he started calling. "Ginger, wake up, for goodness sake!"

"What? Ouch, that hurts!" howled Ginger.

He would probably have woken all the others if Val had not clapped his hand over his mouth in time.

"Be quiet, will you! Ginger! Juan's not here!"

After taking a deep breath, Ginger shook his head and said, "How come? Where's he got to?"

"I don't know... Look!" And he shone his torch again at Juan's bed.

"Well I never!" drawled Ginger. "What are we going to do?"

He sat up in bed, found his torch on his bedside table and said, "If you ask me, we'd better wake Kolya at once."

"But perhaps we're raising the alarm for no reason? Perhaps he's just gone out for a minute?" objected Val, rather unsurely.

"No, Juan never does anything without a good reason. You saw how he cheered up after the hike, didn't you? He was ever so happy and kept smiling as if he was waiting for something."

"Marina told me she saw Juan get another letter. He grabbed the envelope, glanced through the letter and started dancing for joy."

"Well, so what?"

"Well, who knows! Marina wanted to ask him what news he'd had in the letter but he just said with a smile, 'Excellent, excellent news!' and dashed off!"

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Marina made me promise not to tell anyone and I've made up my mind to learn how to keep secrets. Even Marina was pleased with me!"

"Marina was pleased with you!" Val mimicked him. "But what if Juan's had an accident of some sort? What then?"

"What sort of accident?..."

"Well, any," Val turned his torch on and shone it at the window. "Just look at that fog! Hang on a minute! Quick, shine your torch there as well... Over there on the window-sill."

The two beams of light fell on the window-sill and the boys spotted sorbie clear plimsoll prints. Then one of the beams darted under Juan's bed and alighted on his slippers but his plimsolls had vanished. The beam climbed higher and lit up the bedstead on which their Young Pioneer uniforms used to hang at night. It, too, was bare. Then it wrenched Juan's bedside table out of the darkness where he usually kept his watch and torch at night. They, too, had vanished.

"Do you understand?" asked Val anxiously.

"No, I don't understand a thing."

"Quick! Let's get Kolya... Stop making your bed creak! Get dressed fast!" ordered Val.

* * *

Ginger shied like a scared cat.

"Oh you cowardly custard!" Val said angrily and boldly grabbed hold of the handle.

The door turned out to be unlocked. They tiptoed in and Val called out quietly, "Kolya, Kolya!"

And as there was no reply, he called out louder, "Kolya! Wake up! Juan's disappeared!"

There was still no answer. Ginger felt for the switch: Kolya was not there and his bed was neatly made. So he had not even been to bed yet although, according to Val's watch, it was already one in the morning.

"Where on earth could he be?" asked Val in amazement.

"Oh, something really fishy is going on... First Juan, then Kolya... What could it all mean?"

Val scratched the back of his head, fell to thinking and then said resolutely, "We've just got to find them!"

"What, in this fog?"

"We've got to find them! But how?"

"I know how!" said Ginger slapping Val on the back. "Like pathfinders. We've got torches. The ground's soft. We'll take our compasses. Come on..."

"Hang on, hang on," Val stopped him. "Where shall we start?"

"Why, we'll follow their footprints... Starting from the windowsill. Yes, it's a real print, not just a track..."

Instead of letting him see that he had only just caught onto his plan, Val at once took over and started giving orders, "Turn out the light! Keep cool! Do as I say!"

* * *

They followed Juan's footprints according to all the rules of pathfinding. Although the ground was damp from the fog and Juan's tracks were clearly visible, Val still insisted on looking at them through the large magnifying glass he had taken off Ginger.

"This isn't like looking at stamps... In a fog you've got to have the eyes of a hawk and the scent of an Alsatian!" he declared.



And he not only examined each print with his magnifying glass but also sniffed each one like a dog and ordered Ginger to light the tracks with his torch.

"It looks as if he came this way alone," he concluded after a while. "There're no other footprints around..."

"But where's Kolya got to then?" asked Ginger.

"Yes, the plot's shrouded in mystery, as they say," muttered Val, kneeling down on the ground again.

But after leading the boys a long way from the camp, the footprints suddenly vanished.

"Oh, shine your torch properly!" ordered Val.

Ginger turned on the other torch and shone them left and right, trying to pierce the fog. Val crawled along the path on all fours, sniffing all the time but still found nothing... So he got up and brushed the mud off his trousers.

"Locate our bearings!" he curtly ordered Ginger.

The latter held his hand up to his eyes, glanced at the flashing needle of his compass and reported, "North-east. We're headed for our cave." After a short pause he turned off his torch and added crossly, "What the dickens has he gone there for? Fancy walking alone in a fog like this... But what if..."

Without letting him finish, Val thumped him on the back with his fist.

"What is it?"

"Sssh!"

They stood stock still, craned their necks and listened. It was quiet and dark all around. Then suddenly there was a crackle in the bushes and some branches snapped.

"Lie down! Crawl after me!" whispered Val, dropping down onto the ground.

Trying not to lag behind, Ginger kept his nose almost pressed to Val's heels. His teeth were chattering and branches kept springing into his eyes but he did not care as long as he felt Val's heels ahead. And just because his teeth were chattering, it did not mean he was scared! It was simply awkward crawling along like this... Ginger jerked himself along even harder but, oddly enough, Val's plimsolls had vanished. He jerked forward again and, finding no obstruction ahead, wriggled slightly to the right downhill. He tried shouting out but he had lost his voice and only gargled strangely, "Aaga ... aaga ... aaga..."

"What are you roaring for?" he heard Val whisper from up above. "Well? Answer me! Ginger, where are you?"

A bright torch light suddenly flashed on, and then another and yet another behind it. Ginger screwed up his eyes and loud voices rang out all around. Then he heard Kolya say, "So here they are, our fugitives! Shine your torch this way, Ivanov! One seems to have fallen down a pit!"

Beside Kolya stood two strangers. Although he could not see their faces, Ginger felt their strong hands as they dragged him out of the pit and in a trice set him on his feet again.

"You haven't hurt yourself, have you?" asked Kolya.

"No ... the leaves are as soft as feathers down there..." replied Ginger, already coming to his senses.

"Oh, you've always been lop-eared and you still are!" said Val close-by.

Kolya and the strangers burst out laughing.

"They're in a good mood," Ginger thought to himself, "so they won't tick us off." And he was right. Kolya had no intention of telling the boys off. He only grinned slyly when, vying with each other, they started telling him how Juan had disappeared.

"A person's gone missing ... so we've got to look for him but you're standing here and ..." Val said impatiently and nearly blurted out, "grinning all over your face."

But then Kolya frowned and said, "Juan's fast asleep in bed and having sweet dreams."

And, sure enough, when Val, Ginger and Kolya tiptoed into the dormitory and Kolya shone his torch on Juan's bed, the latter really was back in bed again. Still unable to believe his eyes, Ginger touched Juan's foot sticking out from under his blanket and said, "Why, it's true... It really is him..."

Val stood stock-still, his mouth open.

The plimsoll prints on the window-sill had vanished.

* * *

Hilda was no less surprised than the boys when she spotted Juan in the exercise class the next morning.

Calls of 'One-two! Three-four!' rang out across the camp.

Along with all the others, Juan was now squatting down and now springing up. Hilda came up closer to the exercise ground

and stood behind a thick oak trunk. No, there was nothing wrong with her eyesight: incredible as it seemed, it really was Juan.

All of a sudden Hilda turned round sharply and saw Kolya standing in front of her.

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" he said unsmilingly. "Yes, it really is Juan... Safe and sound..."

Hilda tried to smile.

"What does all this mean?"

Then two other men came out from behind the bushes.

"Please follow us!" one of them said. "You, Lieutenant Shcheglov, can stay here."

Kolya nodded.

Meanwhile the excercise class went on: 'One-two! Three-four!'

Chapter Fourteen

Several days had passed but even under arrest Hilda was the same as ever: her hair neatly-combed, her eyelashes made-up and the same constant coquettish smile on her face. She would light up the cigarette offered to her, politely say "thank you", cross one leg over the other and start spinning the same yarn again.

"Oh sir! As I've already said umpteen times before: there's been an annoying misunderstanding... Well, just look at me carefully. Do I really look like a spy?" And then she gazed at the colonel with her very clear, honest eyes...

Yes, one could only marvel at her tenacity and presence of mind.

But that day she had another meeting with Colonel Dziuba.

"So, let's begin at the beginning again," said Vassily Ivanovich, settling down more comfortably in his seat. "You assert that you committed a noble act when you rescued the two boys."

"Why, don't you agree with me?" smiled Hilda, screwing up her eyes slightly.

"Yes, why not. After all, you really did rescue them..."

"Thank you!"

"Save that for later..." replied the colonel, also grinning ironically. And after waiting for her to light up her cigarette, he said out of the blue: "But isn't it possible that the accident which occurred with their boat was all your doing?"

"Colonel! Think what you're saying! That's an appalling crime!" she exclaimed with a frightened look.

"True. So you realised what you were doing."

"But really! Allow me to..."

"No, I won't," Colonel Dziuba interrupted her.

"But where's the evidence?"

"It'll be presented to you tomorrow. But in the meantime you can go and think back to what you did on that memorable day from 5.30 to 6.20 in square 54/3."

* * *

...She had no trouble finding him from the photograph, going by his black hair, wide forehead and the pouting delicate lips he had inherited from his mother. But even if she had not had a photograph of him, she would have recognised Juan by his eyes, now impudent and sparkling, now sad and pensive, like his father's...

Finding him was easy enough but how to win his confidence? How should she begin? A plan was unexpectedly given to her by Juan's friend, Val.

"Yes, to start off with, I was ever so lucky," Hilda recalled the start of the operation, lying on the hard bunk in her cell. "If I hadn't overheard their conversation under the old boat, I would have had nothing to go by." Then she smirked, "Even little boys love conspiracies. Thinking snub-nosed Natasha was walking round the boat and eavesdropping on them, they switched to Spanish."

She wanted to remember everything she had been taught at the junta's intelligence training corps but then stopped herself. What good was it to her now? Instead she ought to analyse the chain of events, discover her mistakes, get ready for the battle with the cunning colonel the next morning and decide what she could admit and what she could categorically refute.

"Remember, remember, Hilda, everything down to the minutest detail," she ordered herself.

"So, Val had said they would be fishing on the north face of Rock Patience. A convenient and inconspicuous spot. And this was the same square 54/3 that the colonel had mentioned.

"The plan matured. I went out in a dinghy at the same time as the boys. They rowed towards Patience from the south, I from the west. The huge rock sealed us off from each other. Naturally, I had my transistor with me so that I did not get bored. Yes, that's all fine. There's nothing suspicious about that. And then I reached the little grotto. Two more strokes of the oars and I was at my mooring. I started to make contact when the bugle sounded on the shore, and my transmission lasted only fifty seconds. Surely my bearings could not have been fixed in such a short time? And then I popped my transmitter into its special case, attached it to a small anchor and dropped it to the bottom of the grotto, keeping another transistor just like it in the dinghy.

"Then I put on my mask and flippers, checked my dynamite stick and my watch, lowered myself into the water, pushed the boat away from the grotto and dived down."

She recalled what hard physical effort the first part of her operation had cost her. Her arms and legs were quite stiff for two days. But here, too, everything had gone according to plan. After all, it wasn't so easy to rescue two drowning children.

So where had she slipped up?

And again she racked her brains and quizzed herself. Thank heavens, she was asking the questions herself for the time being...

"I hardly managed to catch the boat up. Our Val's not a bad rower. Then I reached down to the bottom of the boat with my hand and pressed the detonator. The frame cracked and the boat started sinking. In no time I pulled off my mask and scuba. Then came cries of help. But I needed help myself first, I gulped down some fresh air and somehow regained my calm so as not to save the wrong boy. I didn't give a damn about Val—he could drown for all I cared and then there'd be one Soviet pup less in the world but Juan was another matter... He had to stay alive for the time being... I couldn't go home without him. No, I simply couldn't but he was already choking. I tore him free of Val and headed for the rock. I made it... I had to give him artificial respiration but my legs gave way under me. Then came the piercing sound of a siren from the shore. Help was on its way. Still it was me and not they who had rescued Juan. Only me. He had to be totally convinced of this. I glanced round and saw Val crawling out of the water... Well, so much the better: I'd rescued

two Pioneers!.. A launch was racing towards us at a crazy speed.

"No, everything was fine here, too... What evidence could the colonel produce against me? Nothing."

Calming down, Hilda closed her eyes and sank into a deep sleep and then all of a sudden she clearly saw Juan's suntanned face, velvety brows and beads of perspiration on his forehead. He was energetically doing his morning exercises... Hilda was about to shout out but fear contracted her throat.

"No, no, no! It's only a dream! He can't be there... He can't be!"

She awoke, bathed in cold sweat, and lay still for a long time, not knowing whether to believe her dream or not. And then all of a sudden she sank her teeth into her pillow and started howling.

Chapter Fifteen

At the interrogation the next morning, with cigarette in hand as usual, Hilda told the colonel about her boating trip.

"Oh, Colonel, I was literally bewitched by the sight of the first rays of the sun touching the sea. That morning my little transistor gave me a present. At about six o'clock I listened to the magic sounds of 'The Moonlight Sonata'. Yes, incidentally, do you know whom Beethoven dedicated this sonata to?"

"Julietta Gvinciardi," replied Dziuba, much to his own surprise.

Hilda gazed curiously at him, wondering what he thought of her now and whether he believed her.

"Well, as for what happened next you know everything yourself," she continued after a pause. "I moored by the rock, put on my mask, dived under and swam until I tired, and when I surfaced, I suddenly spotted the accident... That's just about all, I think, Colonel."

"All? No, it's just the beginning. You asked me to produce evidence of your spying, didn't you?"

"Well, just facts. Why call such a serious business as rescuing two boys spying?"

The colonel grinned ironically and handed her one of the files lying on the table.

Hilda fleetingly glanced at the colonel, ran her hand through her hair and opened the file. Meanwhile the colonel jotted something down slowly in his notepad.

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Hilda was the first to break the silence.

"But what's all this got to do with me?" she objected. "Something about an explosive device, frogmen, bringing up the dinghy and the opinion of a commission of experts..."

"Well, just read on," the colonel interrupted her. "Yes, and, by the way, here are some visual aids to help you grasp the document better."

He walked up to the wall, opened a door in it as if by magic and took a small transistor out of the safe.

"I hope you won't deny this belongs to you?"

Hilda looked attentively at the transistor and thought for a while.

"Why, don't you recognise it?"

"Yes, I think it's mine..."

"And this?"

The colonel was now holding another transistor, exactly like the first. Hilda screwed up her eyes and glanced first at one and then at the other.

"Which of them is the transmitter?" asked the colonel.

Hilda leaned her whole body forward like a cat preparing to pounce.

"Let's not play guessing-games. You know what? I'll help you! The transmitter's in my left hand. Yes, the very little case at the bottom of the sea by the grotto. It was with you on dry land once—during the hike."

Hilda sat perfectly still as if she had been ordered to freeze.

"Well, but now let's go back to the charge," continued Dziuba, banging the safe door shut. "Yes, read on! You'll find the exact deciphered text of the transmissions. Boa to Shark and vice versa. From start to finish..."

Chapter Sixteen

She was back in her cell again. It was late at night but she did not feel in the least like sleep. Her well-rehearsed story had collapsed like a house of cards.

"So, it went wrong as soon as I made my first transmission. Then they found the transmitter. Of course, I could deny that it belonged to me. But what about the water-proof case, damn it..."

She stood still by her bedside table, picked up her cigarette packet without thinking, and a wry smile ran across her face.

"No doubt about it," she thought, "this would make a good ad for the firm Bungler and Co.! I could testify to the fact that the case was guaranteed to keep not only radio equipment safe at the bottom of the sea but also the fingerprints."

In her mind's eye Hilda clearly imagined the border guards' delight when the fingerprints on the transmitter matched up with those on the other objects.

"And as for that bloke, Kolya ... he was probably most delighted of all. After all, he had me in his clutches. How could I take him for a simpleton! Mind you, I have to give him credit for his work. By letting me get the better of him each time, he made a study of my character. Lord, how skilfully he tricked me at the shooting range! How clumsily he held his gun and missed the target... And how confused he looked whenever he met me!"

She stopped by the table again, took another cigarette, flicked her lighter and lit up. The pain in her temples seemed to be fading at last.

"One more drag and then bed!"

But one hour and then two hours passed and she still had not turned in. The mysterious story with Juan was digging into her head like a thorn.

Chapter Seventeen

Hilda was quite sure Juan would come running up and show her the letter whose contents she knew by heart. How could she fail to, you see, when she had written it herself, and then stuck a stamp on the envelope and posted it in town? It contained only a few words but she was sure it would have a profound effect on the boy. He was to meet a friend with a note from his father. All alone in a very conspiratorial manner. And Juan was bound to bring this letter to Hilda who looked so like his mother. Then she would get what she wanted: he would open his heart and reveal all his secrets to her and tell her all about how his mother was killed and how his father arrested, and about Uncle Emile and his comrades in the Revolutionary Committee. She promised faithfully not to tell anyone else and Juan promised not to hide anything from her.

"Oh, don't worry so, my angel," she said soothingly to him after they had read through the letter several times together.

"Can't wait to meet this man! I must see him! He's got a note from my father!" said Juan, trembling all over, as though delirious. "I must meet him. Do come with me, Hilda!"

"But he asked you to come alone. You told me yourself that one must never break the rules of a conspiracy. If you do, you may let down your father's friend. I'll only take you there."

But when and where was he to meet the messenger?

"Don't worry, you'll get another letter!" Hilda reassured him.

"I can't wait! A note from my father!"

Everything had been calculated exactly: the second letter set the meeting for 23:00 hours on the sea shore where people would be waiting in a submarine.

* * *

Juan's knees trembled as he crawled out the window and sprang down. It was dark and so foggy he could see no more than a few feet ahead. He walked slowly with his arms outstretched like a sleep-walker. If only it wasn't foggy! Val and Ginger were fast asleep in bed and heard nothing. But he had to keep going. He was terribly frightened but he had to keep going... His compatriot was waiting for him with a note from his father. Hilda would be somewhere near the turning. She had promised to accompany him to the meeting place and he would not feel so afraid with her in the dark. But where was the wretched turning?

"Is that you, Juan?" he heard her call and replied joyfully, "Yes ... it's me, Hilda!"

And there she was beside him.

"Nobody saw you, did they, Juan?"

"No. All the others are asleep. I got dressed quietly, jumped out the window and came here..."

"Well done! You'll make a fine revolutionary. Can you keep a secret?"

"But you're not going to leave me on my own, are you?" asked Juan anxiously.

"I'll wait for you nearby and then see you back to camp... But now give me your hand and let's go."

Hilda had picked the old boat behind the rocks as the meeting place.

"Here we are," she said. "Now hide under the boat as we arranged."

"But where are you going to be?" Juan asked anxiously again.

"I've already told you—just over there behind the rocks," she said, touching his forehead. "Gosh, you're so feverish. Take this pill. That's right. And now hide," she said, lifting the side of the boat.

"Remember the password. He'll tap three times on the bottom of the boat."

"I've got it!" replied Juan.

"Fine! He should be here any moment now."

* * *

He walked or rather crawled out of the sea like a turtle. With a square helmet on his head, a metal hump on his back and long tentacle-like strands of seaweed on his legs, he looked more like a sea monster than like a man. He was carrying an underwater machine-gun and a rubber sack of some kind. Jet-propelled, he moved smoothly and fast underwater but would not get very far in such gear on dry land. So he took off his helmet, lifted the heavy weight off his back, gulped down some fresh air and started walking across the beach...

Hilda nearly cried out in surprise when a heavy hand clamped down on her shoulder.

No matter how hard she listened, she still heard nothing except the splash of waves. And he was more like a soft-padded lynx than a man. You could only admire such expertise.

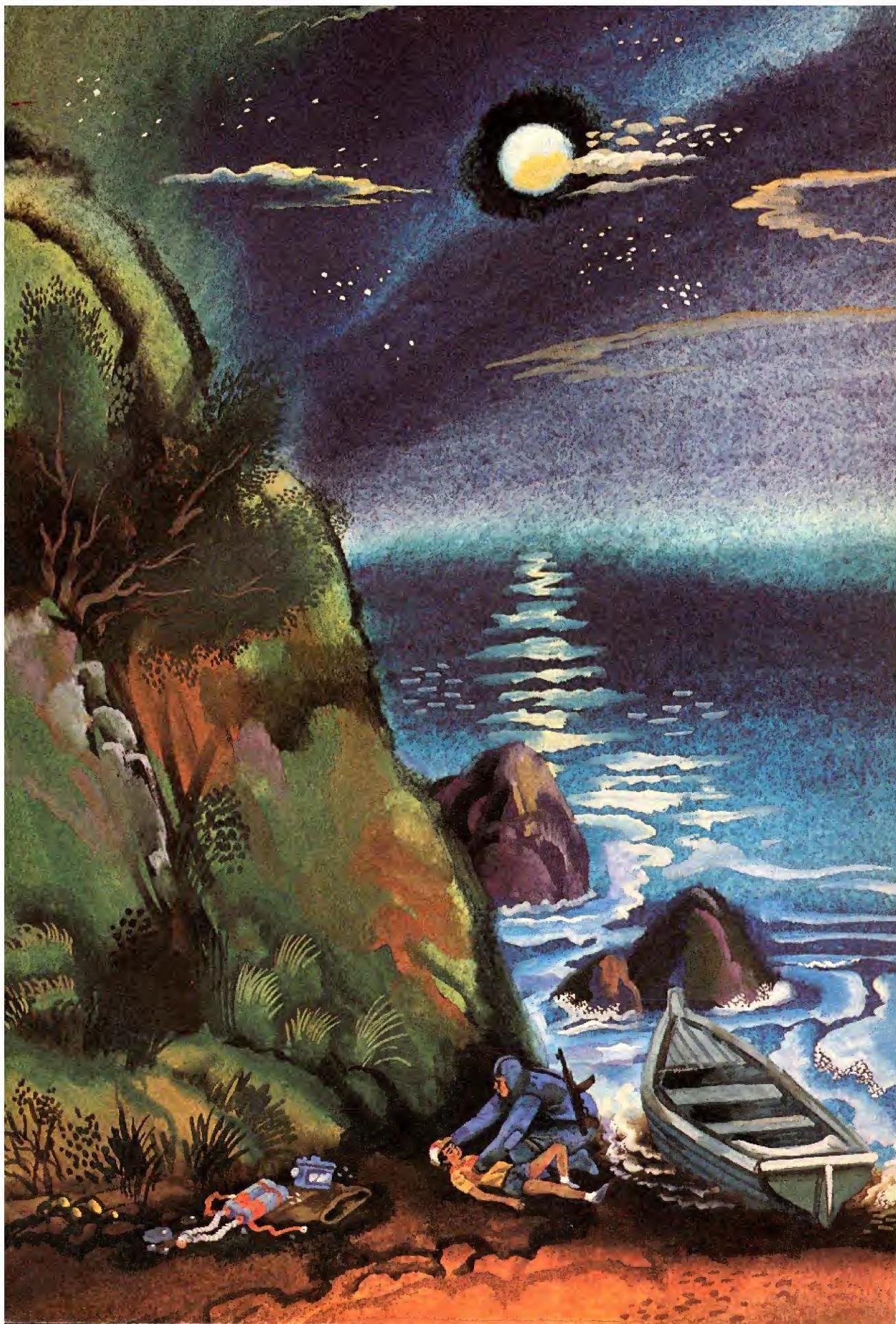
"Do you like oysters?" asked the stranger gruffly.

Before replying, Hilda tried to remove the heavy hand from her shoulder but it pressed her down like a lead weight and so she replied hastily, "I prefer squids!"

"Where's the load?"

"Under the boat. You can take it... I hope you haven't forgotten to bring another helmet for him?"

"Everything's on the shore. We'll deliver him in a complete underwater suit."



And then he quickly lifted the boat and rested it on its keel...

"Hey you, get up!"

Juan did not stir.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's fast asleep. I've doped him. It's easier this way without any unnecessary noise."

He bent over Juan, pressed his ear to the boy's chest, listened to his regular heart-beat and gentle breathing and gave a sigh of relief.

"He'll be awake by morning and as fresh as a daisy," said Hilda. "I know from my own experience. But I'd better be off! Mission accomplished! Greetings to Shark!"

And then she vanished in the fog.

Chapter Eighteen

Only a few days had passed since Hilda's arrest but she had completely changed. Her eyes were now full of fear and confusion. Juan had not been kidnapped after all but who was to blame?

Most likely, Shark's liaison man. It was he who had bungled the operation handled so brilliantly by Hilda.

And then Hilda suddenly found out the truth: she had voluntarily, of her own free will, handed Juan over to a Soviet major by the name of Kuvshinov whom she had mistaken for a liaison officer. Yes, to that very same man with the heavy hand and gruff voice. And the one she had really been waiting for was now behind bars like her.

Realising her cards had been trumped, Hilda told the colonel everything she knew for she now had nothing to lose. She was well aware that her only chance of getting off more lightly was by confessing. And so trying not to omit a single detail, she spoke hurriedly fearing she might not be allowed to finish.

And Dziuba listened patiently without interrupting her.

At last she finished, sank back heavily in her chair and closed her eyes but this was only a pretence. She was, in fact, carefully scrutinizing the expression on the colonel's face.

"He's pleased with my candour," she thought fleetingly.

And then all of a sudden he asked, "I'm asking you for the last

time: for what ends did your chief want Juan? And where did you intend to send him?"

Though she had been expecting this question, she was nonplussed when she heard it.

"I... I ... don't know..."

"And what do you know about the Island of Tears?"

Hilda's face turned grey.

"Do they really know about that as well?" she thought in horror.

"You know it very well. It was namely there on the Island of Tears that you underwent your so-called psychological practical training in espionage... Have a look at this photograph."

Hilda saw herself smiling brightly with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, and next to her someone's bare back branded with a five-pointed red star...

Chapter Nineteen

The Island of Tears. This was what the nameless island was called by the prisoners on it. And there were lots of them—hundreds and thousands of men, women, old people and children. Day and night the sentries' steel-tipped boots clicked across the concrete slabs. Day and night prisoners groaned and cries were heard. Hilda was "studying" the psychological make-up of the most resilient convict—Rodriguez Cheveredo, an important member of the Revolutionary Committee. He had been tortured by fire, water, electrical currents and rods but to no avail. He would say nothing, only looked at you, his eyes full of hatred and scorn.

"He must talk!" demanded the chief. "The junta's security depends on his confession!"

New torture brought no results. How could the convict's spirit be crushed?

"I've found a way, chief," Hilda reported one day.

...He had stirred his broken arm and gave out a groan. His parched, blood-stained lips suddenly whispered, "My boy... Juan... Give me my boy..."

Hilda had at once stopped drowsing. She filled a mug with water from the barrel and brought it to his lips. And all of a

sudden he had sent the mug flying into a corner, calling out in delirium, "Don't touch my boy! For God's sake, don't touch my Juan! Don't you dare!"

Then he had lost consciousness again.

"This is excellent, Boa!" her chief had praised her after she had set out the plan of the forthgoing operation. "Bring the little Red scunk here. The junta will grudge no money on such an operation. We'll finish him off in front of his father. No, he won't stand that!"

* * *

Dziuba felt his shirt collar tighten and a jab of pain in his heart. Suddenly stifled, he stood up, walked over to the window, flung it open, took a deep breath. He gazed up at the blue cloudless sky. Across the street children were playing hopscotch...

It was time for him to finish the interrogation and put a full stop. He straightened his tie and uniform although they did not need straightening.

"Are you going to try me?" Hilda asked hoarsely.

"Not only we but the whole world is going to try you and your fascist junta," said Dziuba, slamming shut the bulky file.

Chapter Twenty

"May I come in, Colonel?"

"Aah, Kolya!" said Dziuba with a smile, lifting his head from his papers. "Do come in! Welcome! Sit down here nearer the table. You and I are going to have a nice strong cup of tea and some jam to go with it. Which do you prefer—cherry or raspberry jam?"

"Actually, I'm here on business..."

"No, what'll you have—cherry or raspberry jam?" insisted Dziuba.

"Well... What shall I say, Colonel... Well, may be raspberry jam, if you insist..."

"I prefer cherry jam myself... It's so tangy and smells so wonderfully of the garden. And it tastes quite out of this world."

Dziuba even smacked his lips. "So, I'll order you some raspberry jam, shall I?"

"Really... I don't want anything, Colonel."

"What's up?" asked Dziuba in surprise.

"Well, you see ... a car's waiting for me," said Kolya confusedly.

"Waiting for you? Well it's nice, very nice indeed, Kolya to be waited for!" And then suddenly recalling something, he added, "Oh yes, you were meant to be going on leave, weren't you?"

"Here's my application for leave."

"I see, I see. Written most correctly! You haven't been off for quite some time. It's all my fault. I keep sending you off on one operation after another. But now I'll sign this and you can have a good long leave and a pass to a sanatorium."

"But I don't want a pass to a sanatorium."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I'm going back to the Pioneer camp. You see, the senior team leader's gone down with appendicitis, and needs replacing, and so I've decided to volunteer. I'm due for a long leave, so I shall have time for rest, anyway."

"But maybe there's another reason? Well, let's say, of a personal nature, huh?" winked the colonel. "Isn't Lida waiting for you in the car?"

Kolya knew his burning cheeks were giving him away.

"Here!" said the colonel, handing back Kolya's signed application. "Get some sun with the children... And I'll drop by and see you some time. I want to compete with your anglers. Do you think Val and Juan'll take me into their team? I'm quite a companionable sort of fellow, you know."

"Oh, I'm sure they will, Colonel!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Their stay at the camp was drawing to an end and they would be going their different ways in a few days' time.

Juan and Val would be leaving for Moscow, Natasha for Orel, Marina for Kiev and Ginger for far-off Irkutsk. As ill luck would have it, the weather had turned foul and swimming was banned. A gale blew up from nowhere. White horses started galloping

across the sea and the waves rose and slowly rolled up to the shore, then, gathering momentum, they dashed against the rocks.

"Go on, toss them now!" ordered Val, trying to shout over the roar of the waves and the wind, and tossed his coin first. Then all the others followed suit. Whoever wanted to come back the following year had to toss a coin into the sea. Ginger bent towards Marina and listened to what she was saying: "Make sure you write and send the photos as soon as you get home. You haven't forgotten my address, have you?"

"No! If you woke me up at night, I'd say it off-pat like a poem."

Afraid the wind might sweep them away, Juan and Natasha were holding hands like little children and gazing silently at the waves. Natasha looked grave but Juan was smiling brightly.

Then Val climbed onto a rock which the waves were dashing against.

"Val! Are you mad? Get down this minute! You'll get swept away!" Natasha shrieked.

"Don't worry, I'll come to no harm!" he called back and then crawled on all fours across the slippery rock. A wave came crashing down, but he managed to dodge, and there he was, sitting astride the rock and giggling. Then came another wave, higher than the first and before the children had time to cry out, Val vanished from view. When the wave rolled back, all the children heaved a sigh of relief for madcap Val was safe and sound, clinging tightly onto the rock with both hands. Ginger and Juan rushed to his rescue and dragged him off.

"Serves you jolly well right, you silly swank!" Ginger scolded him. "I've wet my plimsolls because of you!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Marina. "Val, you look like a bedraggled hen!"

"There's nothing to laugh about!" Natasha cut her short. "Val, take your shirt and trousers off quick! Marina and I'll look the other way. You'll catch cold!"

But no sooner had the girls turned away than the bugle sounded so loudly and shrilly in the camp that even here on the shore it could be heard quite distinctly. The bugler was obviously doing his utmost.

"What's happened?" asked Natasha in surprise, but the bugle went on summoning everyone.

"It's an alarm!" cried Val. "We've all got to assemble! Quick! Back to camp!"

* * *

Kolya took one step forward and then said loudly so that everyone could hear, "Troops, align! Attention! Banner—forward!"

The drums rolled in perfect unison, dozens of hands rose and froze in the Pioneers' salute. And the red banner streamed past the formation to its place at the head of the column on the left flank. Then the bugler sounded a new call, summoning everyone's attention: "Listen all! Listen all!"

"All! All!" came the echo.

Kolya felt a lump rise in his throat. He had to speak but couldn't. He wanted to shout out at the top of his voice but instead said very quietly, "Boys and girls!" Then he coughed a couple of times and repeated loudly, "Boys and girls! Moscow radio has just announced that a daring escape has been made by a group of political prisoners from the Island of Tears. Our Juan's father, Comrade Rodriguez Cheveredo is free again! And he's now continuing his struggle against the fascist junta for his country's freedom!"

Before he had time to realise what had happened, Juan was flying up into the air.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" cried the children.

"Toss Juan up! Toss Juan up!"

And he was again tossed into the air, his arms stretched out like a bird about to take wing. And when he glanced down, he saw the formation had broken and all the children were crowded round and shouting clamorously.

And only the standard-bearer and his assistant stood motionless at their post, waiting for the trumpets to sound and the drums to beat a march. And then the red banner would soar high over the children's heads. It would put their ranks neatly in line and lead forward Val and Ginger, Natasha and Marina on their distant journey. And marching alongside, in the same formation, with square shoulders and huge sparkling eyes, would be Juan Cheveredo, their good friend from a far-off country.



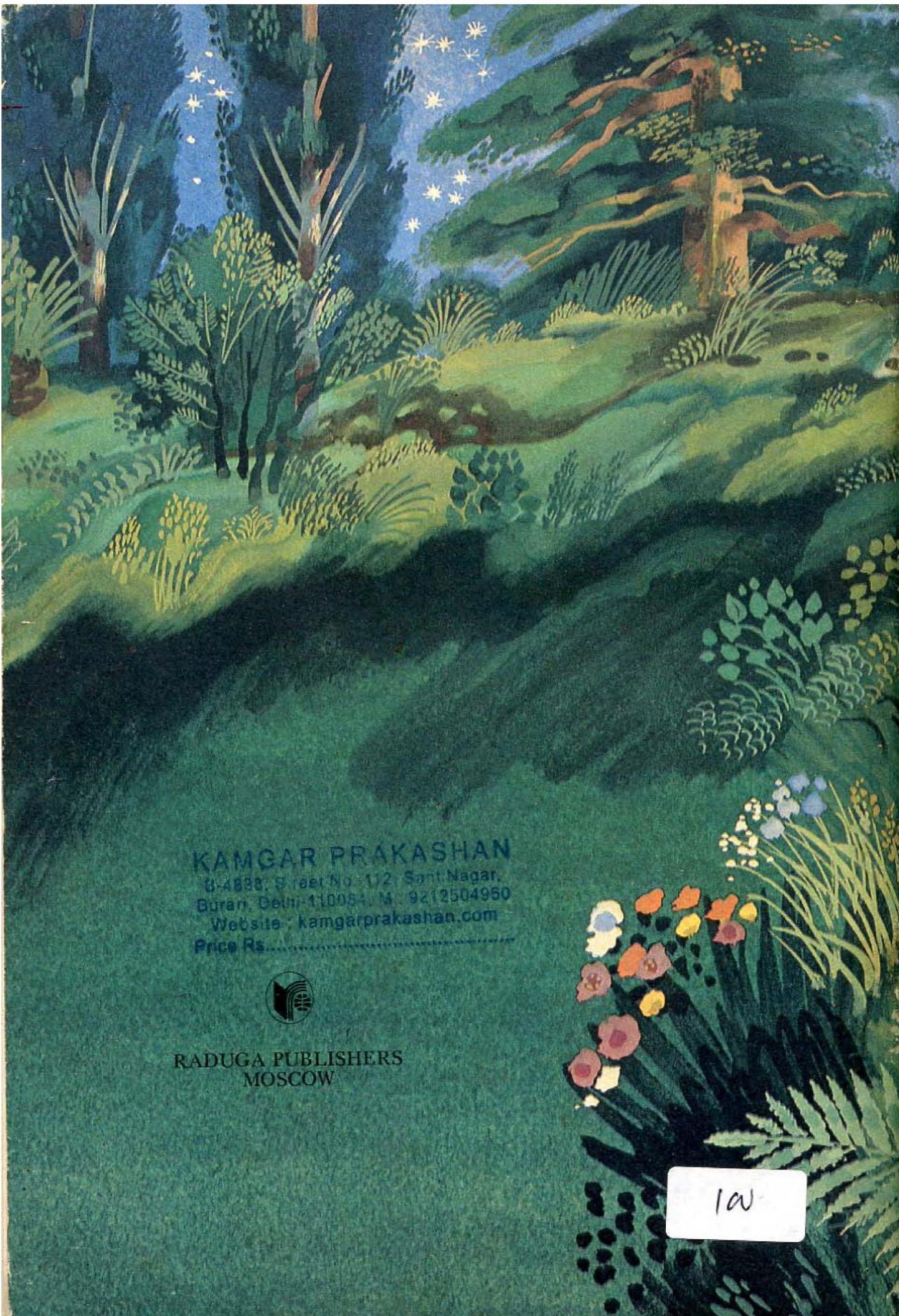
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17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow,
USSR.

Перевод сделан по книге: Ким Селихов. Это случилось у моря. М., «Детская литература», 1978 г.

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Buran, Delhi-110084, M. 9212504960
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